

# SoHo

The Artist in the City  
**Charles R. Simpson**

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**SoHo: The Artist in the City**

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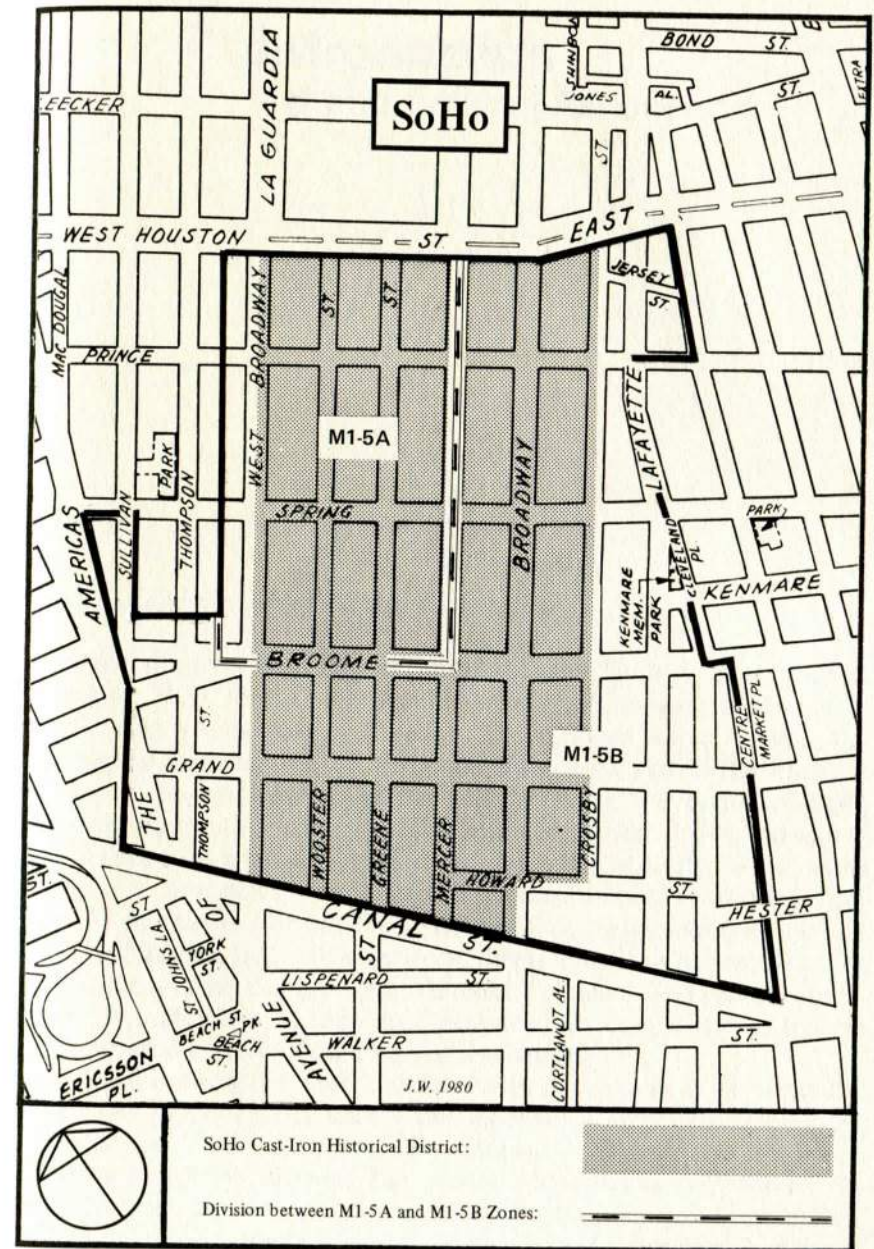
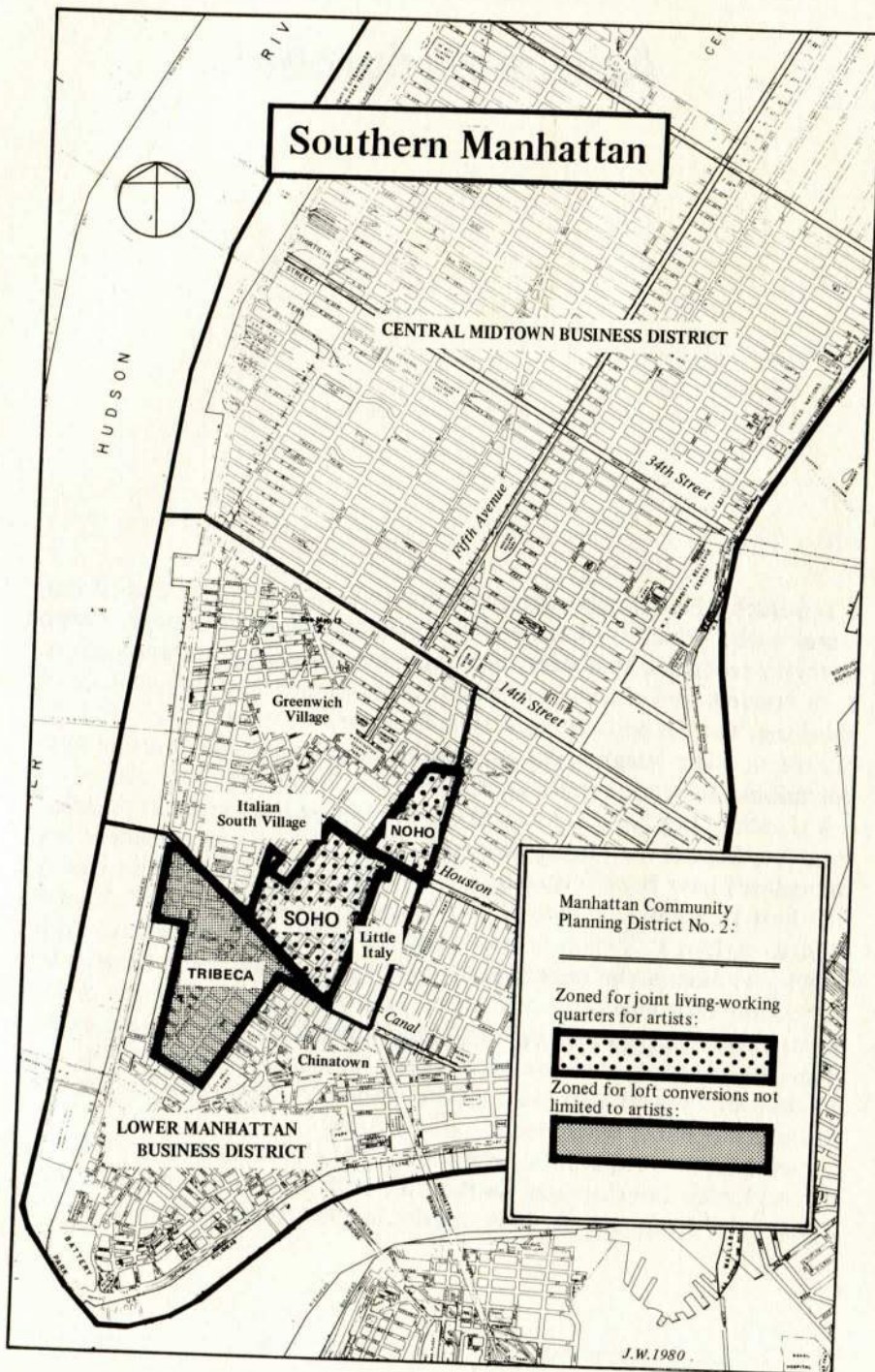
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the demand for contemporary fine art and whose cultural identity is rooted in the dynamics and contradictions of the American middle class.

The artists of SoHo first drifted into the district in the late 1950s. They were a shadow presence in a zone of least resistance to unauthorized dwelling. The artists settled into the segments of industrial decay which ribboned through what was then a zone of doll makers and dress manufacturers, rag balers and waste-paper processors. Painters, sculptors, and dancers found that deserted factory lofts were uniquely adaptable to their needs for unrestricted space. Landlords found artists to be useful scavengers of otherwise unmarketable upper floors in poorly maintained buildings. They were occupants who improved the lofts they inhabited and who were legally in no position to ask for anything but to be left alone, beneath the notice of the law in their interstitial niche. A symbiotic contract was struck. Landlords received a modest rent and could count on leaky roofs being fixed by the tenant; artists in search of cheap but ample studios found space here on a scale commensurate to the widest sweep of artistic expression.

In the decade of the 1960s SoHo's population of artists grew. The industrial base of the area declined and, simultaneously, more and more middle-class youth set out on an artistic trek which led them inevitably to New York City, the nation's center for art education, museums, and art sales. Having perfected the techniques of coping with life in lofts, and finding that more of the district's spaces were losing their attraction for manufacturing tenants, painters and sculptors formed cooperative associations to occupy and remodel entire factory buildings for studio and residential purposes. The "art world," the urban subculture to which artists belong by virtue of their shared commitments and common institutional focuses, was augmented by a new basis of interaction: finding, renovating, and collectively financing loft studios in SoHo.

The extent of the growing renovation brought the artists new problems. At first they had only to supplant the established rat population and provide heat and hot water in buildings with coal furnaces long rusted into uselessness. But as greater numbers of artists copied the success of the "pioneers," open confrontation with the city became the artists' most pressing difficulty. In the early period, fire and building inspectors had been third parties to the illegal housing accommodation between artist and building owner. The inspectors took their tithe in petty graft or simply attended to higher priorities elsewhere in the city, thus informally licensing the residency. The increasing numbers of artists and the growing publicity surrounding their residency inevitably made their occupancy a political issue. An illegal expedient had grown into a *de facto* urban design. Parties with an interest in the course of urban change—the planners protecting their professional prerogatives,

the developers, the urban reformers of varied stripe, and elected officials—generated opposition which made the place of artists in the city an explicit issue.

The SoHo artists, trading on the patron relationship between art and its sponsors, won legal sanction of their residency in SoHo by 1971 in a contest which reveals much about the position of the artist in urban society and national culture. The humanistic prestige of art was hammered into an administrative code of protections.<sup>2</sup>

The artists had won a political struggle to defeat demolition schemes and to secure a residential monopoly in what was otherwise a manufacturing zone, and SoHo subsequently became an attractive location for art dealers. The gallery display technique and the storage of art require extensive but modestly priced space. This is especially true when, as with contemporary art, much of the dealers' inventory is speculative in value and executed on the large scale established by abstract expressionism. SoHo offered the dealers more space for their money than was available in the established gallery district along Manhattan's Fifty-seventh Street. More important, the surrounding artist community facilitated interaction between artist, dealer, and client, generating an ambiance which lured clients away from the more fashionable uptown art neighborhood with the prospect of investing in new trends at their very source, a concept promoted by the garment industry in their use of the Manhattan "factory showroom."<sup>3</sup> During the 1970s new galleries opened in SoHo, and the contemporary-art operations of many established uptown dealers were relocated among the artists' lofts, making the area the focus of the city's trade in the work of living artists.

The galleries, in their turn, attracted art lovers and the "culture-curious" from among the professional and managerial populations of Manhattan which were growing with the completion of each new office tower. Having established themselves as a part of the urban design, however, the artists discovered that complete control of the area was beyond their economic and political resources. The middle class exacted a tribute in return for its sponsorship.

SoHo was rapidly becoming known as a quaint ramble for which architectural guidebooks and historical tours were quickly provided. To exploit the pedestrian traffic into galleries and through the district, entrepreneurs opened sophisticated Japanese, Chinese, and French restaurants. These all but displaced an earlier generation of laborers' cafeterias and inexpensive health-food eating places; the remnant of these thrive by studiously ignoring the transformation around them and supplying the new clientele with industrial or bohemian authenticity. Boutiques with designer clothes and their own coffee bars, wine restaurants, and cabarets have materialized in the spaces between the galleries along the



main streets of the SoHo district. The continuing manufacturing operations—a boiler repairshop spilling out onto the sidewalk, an industrial blade sharpener, paper warehouses, a commercial bakery—have acquired a picturesque prominence. They provide a patina of authenticity to much-photographed sights, as does the commercial lobster dock in a New England harbor otherwise given over to pleasure boats.

The new SoHo “industry,” besides the essentially unseen creation of art works and the surviving manufacturing activity, is the servicing of the gallery crowds—those students, suburbanites, and camera-carrying lawyers who undertake urban excursions in search of the excitement of art and of the artistic life-style. Some of these tourists in the realm of the aesthetic, typically professionals with Manhattan offices and substantial buying power, have purchased lofts in the district. Though a few have set up medical, architectural, legal, or academic offices in their residences, their renovations have on the whole modified the notion of the loft studio away from production toward stylized consumption. The presence of these nonartists and their families has complicated SoHo’s occupational and community structure, just as the recent organization of non-art-related small businesses into a chamber of commerce has complicated the business structure of this art market. SoHo is still an artist community. Treading up a wooden staircase worn smooth by the feet of garment workers and hatmakers for over seventy years, the SoHo artist returning home is likely to hear dancers overhead or smell paint and turpentine. But he is also likely to pass the lofts of newer neighbors, a college professor working at a desk, or a lawyer relaxing in his California hot tub.

Art, including avant-garde art, is finding a growing market among the culturally sophisticated middle class who are returning to urban residence in search of a varied and individuated life-style unavailable in the suburbs. This same middle class now supports new, developer-initiated loft renovation taking place not only in SoHo, but in the financial district of Manhattan, in Washington, D.C., along the Boston waterfront—wherever obsolete warehouse and factory districts are juxtaposed to an expanding core of government or corporate offices. SoHo “gentrification” is being underwritten by a national and international corporate headquarters sector whose expansion in Manhattan is facilitated by tax breaks and planning policies.<sup>4</sup> A growing class of executives and professionals, in step with a trend toward corporate patronage of the arts and influenced by their desire to escape bureaucratization of the soul, are comprising a new market for contemporary fine art.

But a paradox will soon become evident in SoHo’s process of gentrification, should its embrace by the middle class continue unchecked by administrative or political restraints. The housing investment being

made there by the middle class, artist and nonartist alike, will create a real estate market too expensive for the remaining industrial operators and too expensive for most, if not all, artists just beginning their careers. By escalating the real estate market, the nonartists have set in motion a process of community change which could leave them in the kind of homogeneous community characteristic of the suburbs from which they fled. The particularly urban qualities of diversity, the vitality of numerous subcultures, and proximity to an artistic avant-garde may well become priced out of the area. The artists remaining in SoHo could become limited to the small minority with high incomes, or a residue of aging co-ops, their studios rather than their careers having become their wealth, socially marooned in a rising tide of property values.<sup>5</sup> The vital artistic community will have been displaced. With luck, it will regroup in and transform another area of urban decay. But SoHo as a vital community supporting avant-garde art will have been destroyed; a territorial base essential to the concentration and independence of critical artistic activity will be gone. But such a prospect remains some years in the future, as the existing artist residents struggle to incorporate change without destroying the artistic nature of the community.

### *The Artist Figure as a Conception of the Middle Class*

The existence of SoHo and, by implication, avant-garde art in America cannot be understood in sociological terms without an exploration of the relationship between the artist and the bureaucratized middle class from which the avant-garde artist distinguishes himself yet upon which he depends for economic, political, and ideological sponsorship. In Weberian terminology, the avant-garde artist claims a status which depends most immediately upon the middle class for recognition and for conversion into political power or economic position.<sup>6</sup>

The artist, nourished by a subordinate theme in middle-class socialization, makes, in his choice of an art career, a conscious move to realize a position incomparable to the commercial or bureaucratized professions. Art is something of a “sacred” profession in a secular society. It is different—admired and disparaged—because it is seen as striving to create something of universal and permanent value. Neither the shopkeeper nor the office worker, however exalted, can get away with such a claim to emancipation from the mundane. Indeed, as bureaucrats they are at best custodians and rationalizers of the mundane; the artist claims transcendence toward questions of ultimate value. In contrast to the usual tasks of the middle level in a society of markets and managers,



where performances are judged by criteria of efficacy and efficiency, the fine artist can hope to carve out a piece of absolute value; or so the middle class, artists and audience, understand the undertaking.<sup>7</sup>

Artists see themselves, and are seen by their supportive audiences, as not simply adding to a boneyard of art history, but as renewing the vision of civilization and revitalizing the present society. The art community, producers and informed audiences, believes that aesthetically successful new imagery pushes the horizons of reality away from us all, expanding civilized consciousness. Should the process of creating new vision cease, should the fine art challenge go unmet, then the world would become visually finite. An anticipation of sameness and routine would crush the modern spirit. It would be as if civilization, having trod a path inscribing reality, were to confront again its own footprints and the realization of the closed nature of that reality. Such is, I believe, the metaphysic supporting the avant-garde artist in SoHo, a world view which unifies the art community, motivates individuals to launch art careers, and can be transformed into an ideology in the service of artists.<sup>7</sup>

Of course the process by which a work of art is credited with extending visual reality is a social process, largely in the control of nonartists. Exalted as the artist's heroic claims may be (claims prudently muffled, for the most part, to escape the derision of the unenlightened), the artist is revealed by the art market to be dependent upon others: whimsical dealers, emotional and financial patrons, art editorializers, museum keepers, and government grant agencies. These are the parties whose touch imparts social existence to a particular work of art and another season of life to the struggling artist. The art career begins with a perception of the insufficiency of the middle-class careers of parents and neighbors, and so must make a relatively exalted claim to be sufficiently motivating and defensible. Art as one-of-a-kind carpentry, as political cartooning, as an advertising lubricant—such "art-of-the-world" would be inferior to the professions for which it acted as a mere lady-in-waiting. No such mundane conception of art could overcome the political and economic disadvantages which follow the decision to be an artist in this society. Instead, it has come to be perceived as a rebellion in the name of exceptional values and the assertion of an exceptional identity.

Much of the cultural meaning of the artist's occupation in the SoHo community is derived from artistic values harbored within the middle class which act on that class as both a self-reproach and a self-defense. The modern artist figure is a liberation dream born out of the fear of incorporation into a routinized and bureaucratically entrenched lifestyle. It is a negation of the values underlying the career success of those buyers and patrons upon whom artists will ultimately be dependent.<sup>8</sup>

The artist, as well as his sympathetic audience, sharing as they do the

art community's outlook, define the creative artist and the routine world of business, finance, bureaucracy, and professional practice, to be in mutual tension. Whereas nonartistic work is seen to be motivated by extrinsic considerations such as salary, advancement, and security, the artist finds intrinsic satisfaction in the creative experience itself. This creative work is usually performed under economic subsidy from the artist's other occupations, interpreted as a sign of imbalance in the economic order rather than lack of talent in the artist. Nonartistic work pursues economic growth or social domination for its own sake rather than for the satisfaction of human needs. Nonartistic work disrupts the unity of the self, divorcing rationality from emotional satisfaction in the individual. Creative work, on the other hand, encourages personal growth and the unity of reason and emotion in the artistic expressive act.

Nonartistic work is portrayed by the adherents of the artistic subculture as frequently stultifying the imagination with routine and leading to psychological depression. Artistic work is pictured as a personally risky journey to the frontier of social presupposition, stressful but heroic in its implications. As compensation for this strain, the artist can rightfully claim some exemption from competing and mundane social demands.

The nonartistic work available in this particular society of market coercions and bureaucratic logistics is seen as blinding the individual to the reality of persons and concrete things with a rulebook and cash-register method of perception. The routinized organizations in control of society inherently manipulate those people whose behavior they coordinate. Restrictions crush the spontaneity of workers and citizens, and the dominant instrumental outlook of the economy makes creativity a fugitive. By contrast, artistic work reawakens performer and viewer to an awareness of the emotional and visual texture of persons and environments. It is inherently sharable and uplifting. It liberates because it proceeds by self-definition of the task and self-regulation of the means employed in its accomplishment.

Those who share the perspective of the artistic subculture are aware that nonartistic work is socially necessary. It is credited with consolidating the gains made by creative individuals, unburdening them of custodial and maintenance chores. But such work is considered essentially derivative and unworthy of claiming the highest prestige. The creative work of artists is understood to be of primary importance for the welfare of society because it renews both perception and the perceiver, preventing the onset of spiritual atrophy.

Business, government, and helpful individuals are assigned the role of promoting the aesthetic vitality of society by sponsoring and assisting artists without obstructing or seeking to control their work. Artists seek social space within their control as individuals, not a revolution in the



social order. The provision of unrestricted grants and commissions is considered the ideal method by which the routinized structures of society can support creative individuals. Artists, in their turn, should realistically be willing to seek out and accept the support of government and business and to employ marketing agents and self-advertising where necessary, setting aside any childish delusions of self-sufficiency or any impulses to make a bohemian display of their opposition to the mundane order of society. Such display is not understood to be the mark of irreconcilable genius so much as it is the smoke screen for creative failure.

The conception of the artist which these attitudes support is that of a figure whose labor fulfills a longing for individuality born out of resistance to bureaucratized mass organizations. In maintaining the identity of "artist" as an open possibility, society refuses to regard the world of meaning and objects as simply an administered or market system, beyond control or imprint by the individual, which it so often appears to be. The artist role, then, draws content from the perception of contemporary work as largely alienating human capacities for expression.<sup>9</sup>

### *Artists and the Containment of Charisma*

Artistic revolt is less a struggle against the social order than it is a selective rejection of the internalization of that order in the form of limits to the aesthetic imagination. The artist figure in a mass society stands for the possibility of charismatic individuality, of iconoclastic self-affirmation in a marketplace deserted of gods. The artistic identity makes available a revolutionary gesture in the perceived absence of any possibility of collective alteration in the political and economic structure. In such an environment, the artist figure represents an exemption from and autonomy within the confines of an all-encompassing social structure; freedom is achieved through critically reworking the received imagery.

The existence of the artist figure in a society in which social change seems to be routinized and its potential for disruption absorbed represents an "inner-worldly" denial of the domination of the mundane world over the individual. The avant-garde artist is able to challenge mass imagery, that objectification of dreams and desires which commerce generates in the form of movies and popular music and which government facilitates so as to absorb and deflect economic and political dissatisfactions, because the artist treats the realm of the aesthetic as a "calling." This calling is a self-imposed obligation to treat aesthetic experience as an ultimate value, a realm whose satisfactions are derived from critical attention. Popular art generated by commerce, in contrast, too often exhausts its potential as the mood-altering music of elevators,

supermarkets, and workplaces and the compensatory catharsis of television drama-to-iron-by. Falling beneath the need for a critical response by its accessibility, and failing to sustain an interpretive subculture because of its simplicity and rapid exhaustibility, much of this commercially inspired popular art tends to reduce aesthetic possibilities to an economic and political lubricant. The discipline demanded by the fine-art calling asserts the priority of aesthetic values and presupposes the independence of the artist from nonaesthetic sources of determination.

In premodern societies, art was subordinate to religion, the artistic purpose being undeveloped as a calling in itself, and the artist being one who sought to realize a religious content through sound, images, or movement. Max Weber writes, "The development of intellectualism and the rationalization of life change this situation where art is dominated by religious content. For under these conditions, art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation, no matter how this may be interpreted. It provides a *salvation* from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism."<sup>10</sup> In a schematic landscape of bureaucratic grids, the artist figure is the echo of society's desire for an individualism capable of creating new worlds out of the energy and coherence of human personality.

There is a secular mythology in the modern world in which the figure of the artist acts as a foil to bureaucratic man. As such, the artist figure is a phantom presence in the reverie of drowsy commuters; one day they will get out of writing ad copy or importing hardware, and write an acclaimed novel. In the meanwhile, art can infuse their leisure with meaning and humanize the socialization of their children. It might even structure the rebellion of those children so as to reconcile self-affirmation with the limits implicit in the middle-class way of life.

### *The Artist in the SoHo Community, and the Status Community in Urban Life*

As an occupational community of artists granted legal recognition, SoHo is unique. As an example of resident-determined urban planning in the context of far more powerful land use congeries, SoHo is unusual. By what complex process did an occupational community come to have a differentiated existence on the urban map? While SoHo is a community of artists, the literature on community studies does not tell us much.

SoHo is an important focus of urban analysis for several reasons. First, as an urban community, SoHo is an ecologically differentiated area in which occupational necessity and structural obsolescence of



buildings have given rise to a new housing form—the loft as studio and residence. The residential loft is a rediscovery of a preindustrial urban concept in which artisans worked at home, while the occupational quarter is common to both preindustrial and earlier industrial cities, an urban design disrupted by the development of cheap transportation to outlying areas.<sup>11</sup> Rather than being a product of real estate trends, however, SoHo's distinctiveness originated as a spontaneous process consolidated in a political achievement. It is a product of government zoning concessions and land-use policies which artists and their allies have lobbied to create. SoHo demonstrates that the "administrative" component of urban communities, the boundary-defining activities of government described by Joseph Bensman and Arthur Vidich,<sup>12</sup> can be responsive to spontaneous land-use change backed by the political activism of citizens.

SoHo is important as a focus of analysis for a second reason. It is a community which has fully emerged from its urban surroundings in response to the needs of its residents. It is unified by an occupational ideology, by its distinctive institutions and market structure, and by a common territory. As such, it is exemplary of the status communities which organize much of urban middle-class life. Status as a basis for social and, particularly, community organization was given its classic theoretical expression in Max Weber's "Class, Status, Party."

In contrast to classes, *status groups* are normally communities. They are, however, often of an amorphous kind. In contrast to the purely economically determined "class situation" we wish to designate as "status situation" every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor*. This honor may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality, and, of course, it can be knit to a class situation: Class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions.<sup>13</sup>

Bensman has advanced this discussion with his analysis of musicians as an occupationally based status group. By his definition, a "status community is a *consensual* community, in which the individual chooses to organize his major life interests within a framework of institutions, culture, practices and social relationships that are consistent with his adherence to a set of values. Obviously it differs from a territorial community if that territory is not relevant."<sup>14</sup> SoHo is a case where territory is clearly relevant to a status community. It is the focus of its market in art and real estate, its land-use privilege, and its arena for social interaction and mobilization.

Art communities, as instances of status communities, consist of indi-

viduals who produce, market, witness, purchase, or sponsor works of art. The production of art is central to the norms of the community, and the producers of art are arranged according to these norms into a pyramid of prestige. At the top are the most widely recognized and accomplished performers in a particular medium. Removed one step from these celebrities are the secondary performers. This second rank comprises the bulk of the working artists in SoHo and is a confusion of trajectories, some rising while others are diminishing in promise. Individuals shift among presentational settings and social circles as they try to realize all of the occupational prestige they claim.

The fine artist succeeds or fails according to how well he establishes institutional credentials and cultivates a sustaining social network. This network contains fellow artists and occupational contacts in the market, and includes at its core friends or a spouse whose commitment is personal and made on the basis of emotional attachment rather than as a collegial or market investment in mutual support. The network reflects the structure of the status community in that it is conscious of the prestige of its members and attempts to select them on the basis of a rough equivalence.

Artists who earn their living from routinized careers, individuals such as commercial portrait painters or art teachers, occupy a place still lower in prestige rank. Their aesthetic challenges are presumed to originate outside of their own control.

Beyond the circle of practitioners stands the audience, graded according to the professionalism with which it can appreciate and comment upon the productions of the artists. As an audience member demonstrates increased understanding of an art form, a closer social intimacy with the artist members of the subculture is possible. Museum curators, art journalists, gallery directors, and collectors comprise a professional segment of the art audience. They are linked to the formal associations of the art world which make the artist's sales, grants, and celebrity possible. This professional audience constitutes the art world's "gatekeepers," who not only stratify the producers but also link them with the wider audience. By translating the private artistic venture into terms of objective recognition, they set the price, judge "museum worthiness," and predict the potential for distinction which makes an artistic career "a good investment" for artist and audience alike. Janus-faced, the dealers, journalists, and historians of contemporary art are at once powerful critics and spokespersons, publicists and legitimators, of the artistic enterprise.

SoHo, the national center for the contemporary fine arts, is the focus for many status communities within the arts, each distinguished by its own medium. As the location of New York's largest concentration of painters and sculptors, and of the galleries which display their work,



SoHo is most notably a center for the visual arts. Understanding the SoHo community reveals the status community to be an important communal form in the organization of urban life, and SoHo itself to be central to the dynamics of the contemporary art world.

SoHo is an important focus of social analysis for a third reason. As an artistic community, it is a reflection of and avenue to understanding the American middle class. Caroline Ware, Albert Parry, and Malcolm Cowley, among others, have pointed out that the vocation of the artist and the artist posture emanate from the middle class as a result of a critical impulse felt by a portion of that class to differentiate themselves from the wider society's economic and instrumentalist vision.<sup>15</sup> Yet frequently these rebels reaffirm the values, in substance or in parody, of the class from which they seek distance; they become "commercial" in their vocation as artists or writers, or they pass through a "bohemian" phase of self-definition by negation. A. C. Spector, and J. R. Seeley, R. Sim, and E. W. Loosley have found that in middle-class communities practical success and self-realization exist as dual themes in the socialization of children and in the psychological equilibrium of adults.<sup>16</sup> These two themes, or clusters of values, are in tension with one another. The concern for practical success in a career shapes middle-class conduct, and self-realization acts as a humanist counterpoint channeled into essentially recreational pursuits. Vidich and Bensman have pointed out that the instabilities in middle-class culture affect the youth in particular, motivating them to rebel against the constraints of occupational practicality and political realism as a form of the search for self.<sup>17</sup> Mason Griff has found that young people who define themselves as artists reverse the priorities of middle-class culture, elevating self-realization to the dominant position.<sup>18</sup> SoHo artists desire self-actualization without having to relinquish middle-class notions of practical success, and so involve themselves in a conflict of values which sets the dramatic contours of their occupational and personal lives.

The SoHo community shares an occupational ideology that challenges some of the central trends in modern life, specifically bureaucratization as the mode of occupational coordination, job choice determined by economic rationality, and the breakdown of the work task and its determination according to principles of routinized efficiency. Even the integration of home and occupational life departs from the contemporary organization of labor. But ironically, those who oppose these trends by their calling come, as their careers mature, to accept the consequences of these trends as increasingly necessary conditions of their artistic existence.

In order to secure residential and studio space, artists spontaneously created cooperative housing systems in SoHo; but they found that the real-estate market cannot consistently be transcended or evaded. To sell

the work they create, they have had to position themselves dispassionately in an art market and among entrepreneurs who determine which creations will sell. They sought to integrate domestic life and occupation, only to discover that such integration was a burden disproportionately assumed by wives and mothers, and frequently incompatible with the concentration on career required for the husbands' success. They began their residence in SoHo evading housing laws and came to recognize the necessity of protective zoning. They mobilized into a middle-class pressure group so as to defend their community with the tools of the political process. To make the transition from occupational commitment to occupational and residential survival, they drew upon the cultural resources which are theirs by virtue of their educational and economic backgrounds in the middle class. They built upon family experience with real estate, sales economics, the law, government bureaucracy, and the politics of pressure and publicity. Most of all, they drew upon a self-confidence and assurance that, when forced into activism, they could outmaneuver their bureaucratic or commercial opposition. They were able to treat their economic and legal vulnerabilities as problems whose solution required a political campaign, a marshalling of social allies, and the achievement of unprecedented zoning changes. Their tactical confidence and strategic ambition came from their middle-class assurance that, as artists, they were important to society and to the city; and as capable political actors, they could make the city accommodate their presence.

Life in SoHo and participation in its art and real-estate markets, entanglement in its domestic arrangements and in its organizations, has reintroduced the values and conditions which residents, with their career choices, had rejected. SoHo sees itself in opposition to the culture of the middle-class suburb. But while overcoming and so delineating some of the contradictions in that culture and realizing important possibilities for self-renewal that that culture contains, SoHo has come to incorporate much of middle-class culture into its own way of life.



## The Structure of the SoHo Art Market

New York City is the nation's center for the exchange of art—over one billion dollars worth of all types of art changes hands there annually.<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1960s, when the dominant position of abstract expressionism began to give way to more culturally accessible movements, contemporary American art has broadened its audience and its share of the art market. SoHo is now the principal location for New York's trade in contemporary art, a trade which provides the economic basis of the SoHo community and gives it its cultural orientation.

SoHo developed with the general boom in the art market. Art sales accelerated through the 1960s and peaked in 1968, 1973, and 1979. This expansive atmosphere prompted many uptown gallery staffers to enter the market as entrepreneurs themselves, relying initially upon artists and buyers they could take from their old employers and setting up their new businesses in SoHo where commercial rents were far less than those in the uptown gallery area. At the same time, the established art galleries responded to the art boom by seeking additional space to display and store the larger pieces being produced by contemporary artists. As these galleries expanded their trade, they separated their operations into old master, print, and contemporary divisions, moving the modern works to the cheaper and more available spaces found in SoHo.

The growth of SoHo as an art market has been extraordinary. During most of the 1960s there was no gallery presence at all in SoHo. In 1968 a Park Avenue art dealer, Richard L. Feigen, established the first dealer presence in SoHo when he opened a warehouse to service his uptown



showrooms. The same year Paula Cooper, a young woman with experience as a staffer in uptown galleries, saw in SoHo an emerging artist community that could benefit from the local presence of galleries. She established SoHo's first gallery in the fall of 1968 in order to have more ready access to the work of SoHo artists and to take advantage of the large spaces and cheap overhead that her fledgling venture required.

By May of 1975, less than five years after the growing number of residential artists had secured zoning legalization for their combined living and working quarters, eighty-four galleries for painting and sculpture existed in SoHo. In addition, many other galleries and shops had opened to sell photographs, craft articles, and prints. SoHo, by this time known as "downtown" to art buyers, had more galleries handling contemporary art than did the established Madison Avenue district, which had only seventy-four.<sup>2</sup> By 1976 the most influential of the city's art dealers, Leo Castelli, had moved all of his business in contemporary art to his SoHo annex, a business that grossed over \$2.5 million a year from the sale of paintings and sculpture.<sup>3</sup> In 1976 New York's first and only auction house devoted exclusively to the work of contemporary American artists, Auction 393, opened on West Broadway, the spine of SoHo's gallery system.

These commercial galleries, managed by professional dealers, constitute the economic foundations of the SoHo community.

### *SoHo Spaces and the Change in the Presentation of Art*

The ambience of SoHo galleries is in striking contrast to that prevailing in the uptown galleries, especially those which sell old masters. In the latter's salesrooms the atmosphere is funereal. The prospective client is ushered across carpeted floors to a viewing room or alcove. This is draped in dark velvet against the distractions of light and noise and features a viewing easel sitting in the isolation of a spotlight. Assistants bring in the "masters," one at a time, and withdraw to leave the client and the empathetic dealer to a moment of communion.

SoHo galleries try to make art viewing an unintimidating secular experience. The dealers, who tend to be younger, have exchanged their three-piece suits for cowboy shirts and casual slacks. The public is encouraged to look around unchallenged and without ostentatious supervision. These dealers try not to crowd their audience, a new clientele for art which includes well-salaried professionals and business people. The dealers try to give the clients time and space to develop their art perception and to establish a comfortable familiarity with new movements without forcing them to articulate their interests to a salesperson pre-

maturely. The appeal of the art itself and the enthusiasm of the other gallery visitors are given time to persuade the potential client. As one leading SoHo dealer explained, "There's a new market down here. There may be a shortage of good artists, but there's no shortage of buyers. Now doctors are buying art. Madison Avenue was a Cardin suit situation, but down here I'm more accessible—just a guy in jeans. I have no back room where assistants bring in a piece and put it on a stand. Here, I leave the client alone to wander around; the client feels freer."<sup>4</sup> While subsequent steps of the selling process are very deliberately directed by the dealer, it is the initial feeling of self-guided and self-determining viewing that softly draws visitors into their first venture in art acquisition. While finding their bearings in the field, these new clients from business and the professions are status sensitive and have not yet developed confidence in their own tastes, so the intelligent dealer does not confront them with anything as disquieting as a purchase decision.

SoHo galleries capitalize on the features of the nineteenth-century manufacturing and commercial buildings in which they have been located to express this new accessibility of art to those without any prior experience as collectors. Space design emphasizes open revelation rather than arcane impenetrability; gallery layouts suggest that there is nothing mysterious or difficult about coming to terms with art. Large plateglass windows invite the passerby into spaces that are up to five thousand square feet in extent and that rise unobstructed to their fourteen-foot ceilings. The bare floors are hardwood and, like all the surfaces, clean and uncluttered. Walls and ceilings are invariably matte white. What examples of mercantile extravagance remain from the nineteenth century—the occasional fluted iron column, for instance—add a historical patina to the setting, as do the often ornate cast-iron facades of many of the buildings in this district. Such ongoing commercial activity as the loading and unloading of trucks and such industrial survivors as fabric-shears makers and hat factories contribute an impression of productive seriousness and an unaffected disregard of surroundings. Here, art has come to terms with the practical world.

Gallery clients feel a step closer to the artists' studios than they did shopping on more elegant Fifty-seventh Street. Sidewalks strewn with packing crates for art, frame and canvas stores here and there, people carrying art portfolios—these impress upon the buyer that in SoHo one has arrived at the source of contemporary art, the creative furnace.

The need for the large spaces that were to be found in SoHo accounts for the locational choices of the early dealers and still draws new galleries willing to pay the now increased rents. Dealers need room to display large indoor sculpture and tapestry-sized paintings. These installations must be easily changed with each new show, and extensive room is required for their crating and storage. The stark gallery interiors



provide a flexible and neutral background for the art work, which is set off by the use of variable track spotlights. Designers of home interiors for the new middle class have elevated the gallery-look into a fashionable decor for their cosmopolitan clients who adopt a living style in the spirit of contemporary art.<sup>5</sup>

The crowds which sustain the excitement of Saturday gallery-hopping in SoHo find the area an attractive setting for their dining and entertainment. Restaurants, bars, cabarets, and discotheques have sprung up to meet this demand, spreading from block to block along with the expanding gallery core. SoHo wandering has become an alternative to museum going, an alternative with a social dimension. The urbane audiences who have come to associate themselves with the contemporary in fine art, dance, experimental video, jazz and electronic music, can all satisfy their tastes in SoHo. The art galleries, which often lend their spaces to performing artists, encourage the public to interact with art through exhibits of kinetic "touch" sculpture and holographic light installations. The SoHo marketplace for fine art has evolved into an amusement park and performance area where many degrees of identification with art are possible and where the expression of this identification as a life-style can find support.

### *The Print Market*

Most individuals in the casual Saturday crowds do not buy original oils or sculpture. Many are content to demonstrate their sensitivity to visual imagery by selecting SoHo as their place to drink and dine and by carrying cameras. They do, however, sustain SoHo's emerging restaurant and boutique trades.

The first level of art buyers consists of young, college-educated people starting marriages, households, and professional careers. When they can afford art, they often want what is contemporary. They buy original prints and drawings from several print outlets which flourish in proximity to the galleries which carry paintings and sculpture. Well-known artists occasionally produce work for the print market when their other sales are slow. Some SoHo artists have developed careers as lithographers and serigraphers, typically producing one new work a month in their own recognizable style. The works are usually printed in a limited series of 100 or 150, then hand numbered and signed by the artist. Artists who market this work through a gallery can earn a regular income of up to a thousand dollars per design. Galleries that subcontract the reproduction sell each copy for \$50 to \$200, raising the price as a design sells enough to become scarce.

Print galleries, especially those which carry less expensive art posters advertising exhibitions, find they are able to make as much profit from

the framing—an integral part of the buyer's expression of taste—as from the sale of the art itself, so they have their own frame shops which they refer to as "ateliers."<sup>6</sup> Most print buyers are interested in decorating their apartments with art work. Back in their college days, they were among the half-million students who annually take introductory art history courses, and they probably bought their first cardboard-matted reproductions at the college bookstore.<sup>7</sup> Their college introduction gave them notions of what art is, notions with status connotations opposed to popular taste, ideas which have since deterred them from using furniture-store pseudoart or sentimental kitsch as decorative devices. With signed, gallery-purchased prints or drawings they can make an aesthetic identification with the dynamic trends in society as well as bolster their own claims to individuality. If their careers mature at a faster rate than their expenses, they may celebrate their achievements by graduating into the market of one-of-a-kind originals.

While these modest investors in the decorative arts usually restrict themselves to the poster, print, and drawing market, some of them are introduced in this way to art speculation. Print galleries keep listings of the latest prices at which their stock items have changed hands. The original plates are guaranteed to have been destroyed to insure the rarity of the prints, which differentiates them from a mass culture item and makes speculation in them possible. Print investors can share the excitement of the bigger art speculators, but with less risk. Their conversation in the print galleries often echoes that of stockbrokers at lunch: "I could have bought a Buffet in Paris in 1960 for \$100, and now look at the price." Buffet prints and reproductions are now a standard item in the office decor of dentists and certified public accountants in New York.

The print market closely approaches a mass market, reaching out into the suburbs with chain store operations such as the Circle Gallery system. Such systems maintain their flagship galleries in SoHo for prestige and send their salesmen on tours to place art in the furniture stores of elite suburban shopping malls. One SoHo print and poster gallery has a large part of the General Services Administration's business and supplies federal offices with wall decorations. Only the highest government officials have access to the loan services provided by the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Lesser officials make do with prints and reproductions.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Studio as Salesroom*

Artists and collectors have a tradition which legitimates the buyer's going directly into the artist's studio to look over and consider the purchase of works of art. This arrangement enables the collector to buy art



at a lower price, because the dealer, who often marks up the price of a work by 100 percent to cover his commission and costs, is eliminated. Lacking the institutional props of the gallery to certify worth, moreover, artists are inclined to accept less for a work sold in the studio. Artists who need sales hope that subsidizing the exposure of their work to a larger audience through a collector will eventually pay off. In the absence of real demand, the artist doesn't know how to price his work and may sell it either too dearly or too cheaply for subjective or ideological reasons. One artist-turned-plumber, whose once promising painting career has faded, explained,

I used to price paintings at \$800. It took me a month to make one, and I needed \$800 a month to survive. Now they're \$1200, which I need a month. There's no profit in it at all, but I have to ask that much. There's no reason to make a profit if you really like the work [of making art]. Art ought not to get tainted by all that other stuff. You hope someone will care enough to keep the work, so you use canvas and not paper.

Artists who sell very little may allow their isolation from the market to keep their asking prices above the point of sales, but this is the exception. Artists with their market hopes intact willingly subsidize their art by creating bargains for the studio shopper.

Buyers who visit studios are not merely hunting for bargains. They seek to test their perceptions as collectors in the studio, where their taste is unmediated by the commentary of a dealer. In buying art at its source, the collector is claiming to be able to discern the significant work in a crowd of uncertified and unknown pieces. Only the experienced collector has the self-assurance to rummage through studios making judgments. Being among the first to discover, show, and promote a work which later wins significant recognition is the special satisfaction sought by such collectors. Each studio visit, they hope, will unearth an unknown and undervalued masterpiece.

Selling out of the studio is most commonly a tactic of the younger artists who as yet lack outlets in professional galleries. Such artists choose to sacrifice some of the privacy of their working and living arrangements in order to display both their art and themselves to the collector. The collector is allowed "backstage" and extended the privileges of supposed familiarity.<sup>9</sup> Extending Erving Goffman's terminology to cover long-term relations rather than situational interactions, admittance backstage allows the collector to play the role of "teammate" as well as that of "audience." This provides important gratification and legitimation for the collector. Familiarity, however superficial, with the lives of artists can signify the collector's acceptance into the art world as a fellow cognoscente.

Artists with a history of minor critical recognition but without affiliation with a major gallery may cultivate a group of buyers whom they see in their studios on a regular basis. These buyers become friends and promoters of the artist and, while settling on their purchases, extend their visits into afternoons of conversation about the art world. Having been granted social entrée, these buyers have been known to remain patient and loyal for many years while the artist struggles to establish himself.

Even buyers who shop for their art in galleries are not immune to curiosity about the human origins of the art they contemplate. Dealers are quick in making use of this interest. They report that they frequently help sell a client on a program of serious art collecting by introducing the client to one of the gallery's artists during a visit to his SoHo loft. Artists are expected to be on call for such performances. The glimpse of art in-the-making and the acquaintance of a well-known artist often seem to confirm the client's decision to invest in art. The studio visit, managed by an astute dealer, can become a collector's rite of passage into the art world.<sup>10</sup>

Many SoHo artists have participated in a less esoteric tradition of studio selling. In the years before the community was stabilized by zoning amendments and when galleries in the area were few, tour buses brought in groups of corporation managers' wives from suburbs like Mt. Kisco, New York. They became spectators of both avant-garde art and studio living. For a time the SoHo Artists Association, the community organization for the area, helped with these tours by posting notices in its newsletter and signing up artists willing to open up their lofts.

In May of 1970, during the final push for passage of the zoning amendments which would legalize artists' living-working quarters in SoHo, an SAA-sponsored arts festival was held in the area. One hundred artists' lofts were opened for inspection and art sales. Nearly one hundred thousand people, including members of the City Planning Commission, attended the festival activities in lofts and on the streets during the weekend it was held. The members of the City Planning Commission were specifically invited to tour artists' lofts to see for themselves that loft living could be safe, sanitary, and productive. After the artists had made their point to the planning officials, the press, and the public, however, loft tours lost the support of the SAA and of many outspoken residents. The better-known artists complained that too many tourists were coming into SoHo and disrupting the community, robbing them of the solitude they required for concentration.



### Artists' Cooperative Retailing Ventures

After 1971 professionally managed galleries opened in large numbers to handle the distribution of SoHo artists' work. But even the present eighty-seven galleries run by dealers in SoHo have not been able to satisfy the demands for exposure by a growing number of artists. In an effort to reach an audience, young SoHo artists have fashioned a number of cooperative and usually nonprofit exhibition arrangements outside the professional gallery system.

Some cooperative ventures take the form of group shows which pool the publicity resources of several artists and are set up in one or several artists' lofts to save expenses. The "Ten Downtown" show, held annually since 1968, is the oldest such area exhibition. Like those in other cooperative ventures, the participants in Ten Downtown are largely unknown artists, but each is selected by one of the previous year's participants. This continues a tradition which encourages "launched" artists to act as mentors and certifiers for unknowns. Mailings and newspaper advertisements for Ten Downtown regularly draw six thousand or more viewers who follow a tour of the participants' lofts in SoHo and other lower Manhattan districts. While on the lookout for inexpensive and adventurous contemporary art, the audience is also drawn by the chance to see artists in their natural habitat, complete with avocado plants.

Artists who can afford a greater and more sustained investment have organized cooperative galleries. Fourteen such galleries exist in SoHo and thirty-six others in various cities on the East Coast. The members share the expenses of rent, sales brochures, and sometimes a paid manager. Members must also rotate as volunteer gallery staff. In return, members are able to show their work every one-and-a-half to two years, depending in part on their own assessment of their readiness. The members choose from among a constantly renewed waiting list for new members to take the places of the one-third who annually give up the struggle or, more rarely, are absorbed into the commercial galleries.

By addressing and mailing their exhibition announcements, by cleaning and running the gallery themselves, and by sharing expenses, the artists subsidize the costs of the distribution of their art, passing the savings along to the client in lower prices. Costs of operating a gallery for a year average \$40,000; the annual sales cover only half that amount.<sup>11</sup> Artists hope that the subsidies and the exposure will eventually result in their reputations catching fire. With a demand for their work established, they will then try to move into a dealer-run gallery.

Cooperative galleries operate under some disadvantages. The major buyers and critics tend to give less priority to visiting galleries that are not managed by professional dealers. "My tendency is to go to commercial galleries first," said Grace Glueck, art critic for the *New York Times*.

"Professional dealers have taste, or they wouldn't be in business."<sup>12</sup> The dealers, however, do monitor the cooperative galleries and listen especially to what their own affiliated artists have to say about the work of unknown artists on display. The cooperative gallery functions best as a stepping stone to the more professional market, where the artist can expect his work to be more expensively displayed and more expertly promoted.

Because fine art careers may need to incubate for decades before they take off or are considered hopeless and so abandoned, there is a strong demand among artists for critical notice, however casual, and for sales, however nominal. These can have an importance beyond their function as omens of success. Shows, even those poorly received, mobilize the artist's energies. In a dramaturgical sense, they provide artists with a chance to assume as a public identity what are often amorphous and ill-defined careers. The mechanics of hanging an exhibition and holding an opening celebration with jug wine serves to catalyze the support of, at the very least, personal friends and fellow co-op members.

The elite cooperative galleries are those which are the most selective in admitting new artists. "We try for all top quality artists," said a collagist and co-op member with an impressive résumé of work in major collections. "It's bad when co-op galleries have to advertise for new members." There are said to be benefits in showing at a co-op gallery. One woman painter explained, "My co-op gallery offers certain advantages over a commercial gallery. There's no dealer pressure on one, saying, 'This sells, this doesn't. I can sell more of these.' When they do that, they want you to turn out identical pieces." Like the commercial galleries, elite co-ops try to use the gallery's reputation for discernment to certify the work of their members. Co-op members like to boast that some fellow member has declined an invitation to take a place with a commercial gallery, being so content with their gallery's status and its support for genuine artistic innovation.

Artists looking more frankly at the commercial market see this lack of dealer pressure as the disadvantage of the co-ops. As a sculptor put it, "I'm a realist and not a romantic. If I put art into a gallery, I want it to sell. Once I'm through with a piece, I'm not that interested in it. I'm trying to go beyond it. I like very little of my old work. If it's in a gallery, I want to sell it and make money. It's okay with me if the dealer is a speculator. Art is a business like any other. The dealer and the artist need not be in love. He *should* push the artist."

Cooperative galleries lack the managerial coherence and the capital to "push" the artist by confronting him with the realities of the market. Artists who are independent of dealers describe this pressure as a demand for repetition, a curbing of the artist's innovative spirit, a move toward mass production. "[Commercial] galleries don't like to deal in a



single piece," said one such artist, "even a great piece. They'd rather see several variations on a theme, and that can be boring for artists. There is a pressure to replicate. Well, it really is more profitable to make ten pieces which resemble each other—yet are each individuals, of course. The gallery owner will take the best piece for himself, and steer his buyers to the others. 'You must have this to complete your collection!' I am cynical about dealers."

The strength of the dealer-run gallery, and its advantage over the cooperative gallery, is not in a crass application of pressure on the artist for replication of what sells, but rather in its ability to commit itself as a gallery to movements in art and thus to help launch buyers, and incidentally artists, in a new direction. Dealers accomplish this by providing buyers with an interpretive context in which a single work is linked to a larger movement. Buyers are thus persuaded that a piece is "collectible," and art writers that the piece will sustain a discursive analysis. Commercial galleries take a risk in throwing their influence with buyers and critics in support of one or another of the trends in art. If the market doesn't sustain them, they lose not only their influence but also the money required to exhibit the new trend. Since dealers use their personal collections and those of their galleries to create momentum for a new trend, these investments can also be lost on a mistaken judgment.

The cooperative gallery lacks the entrepreneurial ability of the well-connected dealer seeking to lead the market in a new artistic direction. The co-ops do not even try this sort of maneuver. Instead, they have attempted to make more democratic gains for artists in SoHo. The fourteen co-op galleries in SoHo, along with fifty-one others nationwide, have formed an association to further the interests of unknown artists seeking exposure. Since 1976 they have sponsored a street fair, Artists' Day, held in SoHo each May. Along with trying to draw a larger public into the cooperative galleries and attracting the critics, the co-ops are seeking to publicize the plight of the many unemployed artists. This effort has succeeded to the extent that in 1977 a representative of the mayor of New York attended Artists' Day and promised the crowd that 300 of the jobs made available through federal funding for the long-term unemployed would go to artists. By 1978, 500 such jobs had been offered to artists.

While not against government jobs for artists, the commercial galleries are sensitive to what they see as a possible degeneration of SoHo into a semipermanent street fair. They fear that SoHo will become choked with hawkers of leather crafts, performing dog acts, and tightrope walkers. Many close their galleries ostentatiously for Artists' Day, putting signs in their windows explaining that they are "Open by Invitation Only." The professional dealers have a more genteel market to protect. They have thus far fended off any incursions of street art peddling from the

annual Washington Square outdoor sale, held directly to the north. However, Artists' Day and street fund-raisers held opportunistically in SoHo to benefit midtown art schools, have brought regular, if disdained, sidewalk art sales to the district.

The commercial dealers look upon the cooperative galleries as a feeder system, which in fact they are, for artists who can attract attention to their work are usually promoted to the professional galleries. The dealers can comfortably coexist with alternative forms of merchandising art, at least so long as it is not on the street, because they believe that the best artists will come to them, recognizing that they offer the best services. One prominent commercial dealer explained benignly,

A number of artists today manage their careers very nicely from their studios. It's not because they are such private persons and they have refused to become involved with gallery and commercial activity. It's that the artist usually hasn't achieved any exhibition opportunities and says, "My work is awfully good," and he gets together with other artists who haven't had the opportunities either and says, "We're going to try to do something." And this usually has caused cooperatives to form. There a number of cooperatives in the neighborhood; some of them are rather good.

Artists like to be managed, however. They like to have a strong guiding hand. They like the idea of a commercial premises where they're going to be sold. There's no reason why work can't be sold in a cooperative gallery, and it is. They just like the idea of what they consider the professionalism that goes with commercial galleries.

### *The New Art Buyers*

The majority of the new art buyers who support the proliferation of SoHo galleries for contemporary painting and sculpture are people with earned wealth who are new to the pleasures of living with art. They are surgeons, corporate lawyers, and upper-management personnel—individuals who have succeeded within meritocratic institutions. They use contemporary art to express their own achievement of status. In collecting avant-garde art, they find their new sense of social position reflected in works which stress innovation rather than tradition and a radically individual, rather than a collective, social vision. The new middle-class buyers approach art from what they feel is a plateau in their prosperous careers. Art collecting poses a new adventure in self-expression for them, one legitimized by the recent trend toward corporate sponsorship of new art.

Art, commissioned or chosen from the storage racks of artists in SoHo and elsewhere, has become integral to the environment of corporate



offices as well as government buildings. Such art is being used to differentiate the white-collar worker from lower prestige strata, and to humanize the image of bankers and executives. This trend has its origins in the decision of the Chase Manhattan Bank to build a new office tower in lower Manhattan in the late 1950s. The bank's chairman, David Rockefeller, said of this move, "We wanted to get away from the marble columns outside banks and from the image that bankers are glassy-eyed, hard hearted people. So we first determined that we would have a contemporary type of architecture." The severity of the building "called for paintings and sculpture that could be thought of as built-in, decorative features."<sup>13</sup>

Chase embarked on a program of art purchasing, largely of contemporary pieces, not only for the new Chase Manhattan Plaza but for its eighty overseas offices. More than 4,700 works of art by 1,550 artists have been purchased in this one corporate program alone. Said Rockefeller, "The collection [was intended to] provide enjoyment and education for members of our staff and visitors and serve as a means to give encouragement to contemporary artists."<sup>14</sup> Other corporations have developed similar programs, especially for their headquarters.

For those who are conscious of rank, it is gratifying to work with an original painting on the wall, quite apart from the artistic experience itself (which, presumably, is not considered overly distracting). The gradations of artistic "value," from less expensive prints to more expensive paintings, from smaller to larger, are easily reconcilable with the other symbols of achievement and position which orient the inhabitants of the office world. However, art in the office is not merely a parallel symbol system communicating degrees of power; art adds a dimension to the humanity of the office occupant. It says, "Here is a person aware of values greater than, or at least in addition to, mere money." It is for this reason that, while their art collections are often among corporations' better investments (Chase's collection has doubled in value), corporate spokespersons are at great pains not to discuss their collections in profit-making terms.<sup>15</sup> In the bureaucracy, art has come to represent a system of humanistic prestige parallel to more obvious gradations in rank and income.

The new art buyers are not moved by the ownership history of a piece, a consideration which enthralls collectors of old masters. The latter authenticate their purchases and add relish to their ownership with research into the twists of a marketing pedigree. Dealers report that new buyers seek to develop an interest and knowledge in a still developing line of art. Some go to great lengths to anticipate new trends. Hanns Sohm, a middle-aged German dentist, for example, collects the evidentiary material documenting "happenings," performance art, and other

creative events—scripts, posters, programs, photos, and newspaper reviews.<sup>16</sup> He has succeeded in making collectible items from such intentionally uncollectible and untradeable occurrences as Charlotte Moorman's avant-garde festivals and the events of Red Grooms.

Recently, new collectors have been buying the highly technological art of the new realists, which includes deliberately ordinary urban scene painting, popular-culture iconography, and large, Byzantine-sized portraits of anonymous individuals. This work is accessible and appealing to those whose success allows them to objectify the familiar objects of contemporary culture, but whose lack of alternative historical awareness blunts the critical edge of their response.

The buyer of contemporary avant-garde art acquires assurance more quickly and moves in a more volatile and more exciting market than does the collector of old masters. In the contemporary-art market, prices and reputations can change quickly. It takes time for artists to achieve recognition as "twentieth-century masters," and that recognition seldom comes during the artist's lifetime. Critics and art historians are more concerned with the formation of a consensus about the prestige of art accumulated from the past. They resist certifying the most recent work. The largest-selling college art-history textbook devotes a mere 26 illustrations out of 1,268 to post-World War II art.<sup>17</sup> With less critical opinion to guide the buyer and, in the case of a still productive artist, with the number of works in the market still uncertain, it is difficult for a consensus to emerge about the merit or fair price of an avant-garde piece. A buyer with strong enough convictions to take risks can more easily become influential as a collector of contemporary, rather than of older, art.

The buyer of contemporary art finds much cheaper prices than would a collector of old masters. Realizing that the experience of acquisition excites the buyer as much as looking at his purchases, SoHo dealers try to keep the young collector in the lower price brackets so that, within a given budget, the buyer can multiply his purchase anticipations and completions. The newer the artist, the cheaper the prices, so new collectors are steered toward less established artists. Explained one dealer,

In one case a twenty-six year old real estate investor came to me wanting a program of collecting. He told me he had \$10,000 to spend. I told him to buy five pieces, one each at two month intervals. This sustains the excitement of constantly buying. He took six weeks to buy his first work, at \$1,500. He waited two months more, and decided he really wanted a piece that cost \$8,000. I tried to dissuade him, and told him to think about it. Then I let him go ahead. It was such a good piece that I knew I could sell it and get his money back if he got into trouble.



Knowledge of the contemporary art market is acquired by a collector in the pleasant context of studio and gallery visits, viewing, discussing, and gossiping with artists and dealers. For the executive or the psychoanalyst, acquiring this knowledge can be a relaxing break from work. Moreover, there is always the chance that a piece will undergo a spectacular appreciation in value. Jackson Pollock's painting *Lavender Mist*, for example, set the record for rapid appreciation when the National Gallery of Art paid over \$2 million for it in 1976. Pollack had died in 1956, and the following year his widow sold the painting, on the installment plan, to a collector for a mere \$1,500; it was this same collector who made the sale to the National Gallery.<sup>18</sup>

The contemporary-art market is the most volatile of art markets because public institutions and major private buyers invest far less in it than they do in the old masters. The highest prices for paintings are paid by public institutions which are, for the most part, inhibited from acquiring avant-garde or disturbingly modern pieces.<sup>19</sup> The highest price paid to date for a work of art was "about \$8 million." It was paid in 1974 by the National Gallery of Art in Washington for a painting by seventeenth-century French artist Georges de La Tour. Second- and third-highest prices also went for old masters, \$5 to 6 million paid by the same museum for a Leonardo da Vinci in 1967 and \$5.5 million paid by the Metropolitan Museum of Art for a Velazquez in 1970.<sup>20</sup>

Wealthy entrepreneurs in industry and finance constitute the most prestigious collectors in the private realm. They collect for reasons of largess, tax advantage, and personal expansiveness, usually lending their acquisitions for public display and eventually donating them to museums. Dr. Armand Hammer, chairman of Occidental Petroleum Company, for example, recently established a record price for a Rembrandt painting, paying \$3.28 million against the bidding competition of J. Paul Getty. Hammer donated this piece to the Los Angeles County Museum, which he supports in a rivalry with the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena.<sup>21</sup>

These wealthiest collectors avoid the contemporary market entirely, thus leaving it unstabilized by the commitment of the largest private collections. They consider it to be too speculative and lacking in critical certification. Norton Simon, owner of the world's largest private art collection, spends up to \$20 million each year acquiring art for holdings worth "several hundred million dollars."<sup>22</sup> But Simon will not buy in the avant-garde market. Neither would Getty, a collector who was willing to pay \$1 million for a Rubens painting.<sup>23</sup> The principal motivation for investing in the prestigious old master market is not a desire to profit through speculation but the wish to demonstrate that one has financially and, one hopes, culturally arrived. These investors certainly have no

inclination to express symbolic attachment to a disruptive and historically scornful avant-garde.

There is, along with the main body of middle-class buyers of contemporary art, a handful of prestigious buyers who contribute some buoyancy and glamour to that market. SoHo's largest dealer reports that less than ten of his buyers are in that class.<sup>24</sup> Collectors like taxi-fleet owner Robert Scull would be included in that category. For the most part, however, American collectors remain reluctant to commit large amounts of money to the work of living American artists. Many of the largest buyers are European industrialists secure enough in their aristocratic credentials to be able to indulge a taste for the American avant-garde. Of these, Dr. Giuseppe Panza DiBiumo may invest the most. He is a Milanese industrialist living in a 225-year-old ancestral home of fifty rooms. One entire room is devoted to the display of the work of a SoHo minimal sculptor, another to a constructionist. DiBiumo and the German industrialist Professor Peter Ludwig "have the most outstanding collections in the world today of American art," according to SoHo dealer Leo Castelli.<sup>25</sup> With its many European clients and branches of European galleries, SoHo has become an international art market.

The inadequate backing by art historians and the major collectors and museums, subjects contemporary art to the ups and downs of the general economy. After a boom in both stock market prices and art prices through 1973, both markets began to slip, and by the spring of 1975, dealers faced hard times. Popularly styled, if not priced, galleries were openly discounting their art up to 60 percent in department-store-like sales. Dealers generally believe that the art market follows a curve that is parallel to the stock market. When the nervous small collector runs short of cash and tries to unload his art, the market is further depressed and the efforts of the dealers to hold the posted prices fail. In the spring of 1976, one year after the slump, a general economic recovery had carried the art market with it, and Parke-Bernet reported sales up 40 percent over the previous year.<sup>26</sup> Record-high interest rates and inflation in 1979 sent speculators into art in such numbers that the auction houses were setting record prices for major works in all categories.

### Conclusion

Artists and buyers meet in a stratified SoHo art market, where the ideology of unrestricted creativity must come to terms with the aesthetic outlook of a new art buyer—the successful manager, business person, and professional—the upper tier of the middle class. This buyer is unlike the economic aristocrats who use art to link themselves with older aris-



tocracies of birth through the display and public donation of certified masterworks.

The new art buyer seeks an aesthetic experience and market product which meets five requirements. (1) It must affirm that the investor's awareness is superior to that of those individuals presumed to be immersed in mass culture. It should obviously depart from older art traditions and folk or ethnic themes, none of which have much meaning to the arriviste perspective. (2) It must be avant-garde in style, and so be expressive of the optimism and orientation toward the future that accompanies occupational achievement. (3) The art should be a contemporary product, so that its acquisition may offer the buyer a socially involving adventure in the art world, an adventure which provides a break from the routinized aspects of a successful career. (4) The art should be conceptually accessible in nonart terms, as having a pleasing design, as enhancing domestic or office decor, or as having familiarity of imagery. The conception must not, of course, be embarrassingly obscure so as to leave its owner with little to say about it. It may be bold in form, even graphic, but in a way that is so clearly artistic that it is secure against the label of "bad taste." (5) The art should be presented by its seller in an interpretive context that convincingly depicts its aesthetic and economic advantages.

Because the contemporary art market is comparatively deficient in the reputational investment of art historians, in the showcasing activity and prestige lending of major museums, and in the acquisitional interests of the largest collectors, the tastes of the new art buyers have a dominant influence on SoHo art.

## 3 The Dealer

### *Gatekeeper to the Art World*

A contract with a SoHo commercial gallery and its dealer-operator is the goal of the swarm of artists who come into New York each season in search of an exhibition showcase and professional management of their careers. More than 4,500 artists receive bachelor's or master's degrees in fine arts each year, and an acute job shortage has developed, especially in such institutionalized positions as art teachers. There are said to be 150 candidates for every available position in the art field.<sup>1</sup> Graduates with art degrees coming to SoHo and hoping to make a name for themselves must adjust to the competitive reality. In recent years, many have prepared themselves with college courses in studio economics. They understand the techniques of career advancement and realize that they must locate themselves along the moving line of artistic innovation and fashion if they are to gain the attention of the buyers and critics. The painter who repeats art history is ignored. As more innovators struggle for attention, however, the pace of art development accelerates, tending to leave the critics and the schools behind. The new buyers seem more willing than the critics and the schools to keep pace with the new developments. The dealer who coordinates the career of the aspiring artist with the hopeful collector has assumed the central position in the market. The commercial gallery has supplanted the museum, the critic, and the school as the arbiter of success.



### *Designating the New Art*

The SoHo dealers have the problem of sifting through these aspirants—"unknowns," for the most part, without previous recognition by critics or buyers. The dealers must decide which of them are producing work that might be marketable as well as aesthetically significant. Dealers deny that they can or do force the market to accept an artist, just as they deny that they persuade the artist to accept or adopt the market's standards. Dealers describe their function in more positive terms: they propose and the market disposes. As one of SoHo's most prominent dealers explained it,

We try to identify work that seems important to us and to the development of American visual experience. And if we think that a thing is significant enough, then we will exhibit it. And then we hope for the best. But then, it is usually only one-third of the exhibiting artists who have what you might call commercial fame. They may get a certain amount of attention from the critics and magazines, but it doesn't always result in the artist gaining material goods. It is very infrequent that an artist is able to support himself on the sale of his work. We show very off-beat stuff here, you know, and we just hope for the best.

The dealers try to winnow the field of aspirants down to a commercially manageable group that still includes all of the authentic talent presenting itself at any one time. The dealer's strategy is to remain accessible to all artists with work to show yet to be very selective about which works will be sponsored for exhibition. Great art works remain scarce, according to the dealers, despite the increase in the absolute number of fine artists. However, the dealers are convinced that their direct and extensive familiarity with the art being produced, and their educated perception, enable them to locate all of the real talent. As one put it,

If an artist of major consequence comes along at this time, it's not likely that he would go undiscovered, even if we didn't discover him here [in this gallery]. In other words, there's so much interest and perception about modern art that it's not likely that an artist is going to be left forgotten, at this point. I mean, an artist may be neglected for a while, an artist of consequence may be left in the shadows longer than he should be, but it's not likely that he'll be totally forgotten. It's not like it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when maybe a great artist, a man like van Gogh, for instance, who never developed any audience at all for his work, could occur. If a painter or

sculptor of any consequence came up in this period of time, the work would be identified. We like to think [this gallery is] there at the beginning to identify it.

The well-known artists agree with the dealers that little genuine talent is overlooked, nor is substantial success possible as a result of favoritism or publicity flukes. Said one eminent artist, convinced that the market recognizes talent, "I don't agree with these charges of art-world corruption, the attribution of success to who you know, who you sleep with, whether or not you're homosexual, and what not. That kind of charge is all overrated."

SoHo dealers explain that they use the most demanding criteria in selecting their artists. According to the head of one of SoHo's leading avant-garde galleries, the dealer seeks to identify work that is the germ of a new movement: "We do have a philosophical outlook. There are certain kinds of work we prefer. We like really adventurous work, that is, the work has to be innovative, and it has to break away from established traditions as much as possible and begin new traditions." Dealers describe their function in the market as recognizing, ahead of other art-world institutions, such as the museums, the exceptional work of art. They distinguish it from the far more numerous pieces of inferior and repetitive work and display it prominently. The dealer sees himself as the art world's gatekeeper, or as an explorer picking through uncharted territory in advance of the critic and curator. According to the dealers, no other institution accomplishes this public service. One dealer explained,

I think the art gallery has become the pioneer, the trying-out-ground for artists. The museum doesn't do the kind of creative work now that galleries can and do engage in. The gallery generally does locate the most important work of its time. The museums just do not have the facilities or the ability to do that, or the willingness to do it.

Institutions like the Whitney have tremendous pressure on them to acquire all kinds of art and are subject to all kinds of internal strife. The Museum of Modern Art is too limited in its funds and is trying to be an educational institution, so it can't do the kind of avant-garde work that they used to do. The Guggenheim, it seems to me, is an historical museum. It's rather sleepy in its attempts to unfold new currents of art. . . . So it's really the art galleries of the major centers of America that can do all this necessary pioneering work in getting the best artists shown.

Critics such as Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times* admit that it was once true that the entrepreneurial dealer was the primary midwife of new



art movements. But this is no longer the case, Kramer maintains, because "both the media and the museums maintain a steady and unrelenting surveillance of everything new, and middle-class collectors vie with each other to embrace it."<sup>2</sup> Judging from the role of SoHo dealers in introducing collectors, curators, and critics to new art and in providing a context of developmental interpretation for it, Kramer would appear to be displacing the dealers from their front-line position without warrant.

### *Sorting the "Unknowns" and Distributing Aesthetic Territory*

SoHo dealers continually look at the latest works of young and older unknown artists so as to be ready to reposition themselves in the art field. The most influential of the SoHo galleries are exemplary in their accessibility to new artists who come in every day seeking an audience and an encouraging milieu. The director of one such gallery declared, "We look at more new talent than almost any gallery in the United States, in the whole world, I think." Artists bring in photographs, slides, and sometimes the works themselves for a viewing. Some truck in their work from out-of-state locations and set it up in the SoHo loft of an artist friend or in the gallery itself when it is empty for a day or two between scheduled shows. Since some works do not photograph well, there is an advantage to bringing in the works themselves. Often a dealer will allow the artist to invite other dealers to look at work that has been temporarily installed in his gallery. Sponsoring experimental work, however tentative that sponsorship is, enables the gallery to assume a prominent position in the forefront of emerging styles. It is good public relations and channels more of the stream of promising artists through the gallery.

If an artist is merely interesting he may not be invited for even a try-out show with a SoHo commercial gallery, so extensive is the available pool of talent. One dealer explained,

We see upwards of fifty artists a week, and we do it with tremendous democratic generosity. We don't make any appointments, or anything like that. All artists are invited to come in and make a submittal of some kind, usually evidence of their work, or they can bring in the work itself. We're open at all times to looking at people's work. We can only show so much, however. During the course of a season, we have here, considering that we have a very good space, we have thirty-three shows a season, and that's more than any other gallery in the country. And we're still limited to the number of exhibitions we can have.

The artist who walks in with slides or a portfolio helps to keep the dealer informed of art developments. Several SoHo dealers, such as Ivan Karp of O. K. Harris Gallery, lecture extensively on contemporary art on the college circuit, absorbing new developments as they travel. When a dealer judges that a work is part of a new direction in art, one to which respected artists are themselves seriously committed, then he is likely to show this work even against the contradictory opinion of art critics. Whereas the dealer must be willing to act quickly to establish a lead in a new turn in art, the critic tends to be suspicious and is hesitant to identify a trend that might prove to be only an insignificant wrinkle in the history of art. Being closer to the artists, upon whom most of them rely for advice about which new artists to treat seriously, the dealers can more easily synthesize the judgment of the artist community than can the critics. This has been the gallery owners' advantage since the great Paris dealers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> A SoHo dealer described his gallery's position in the following way:

We've exhibited here a number of so-called photo-realist or new-realist paintings. We take a lot of punishment for that. In some cases it's considered pretty reactionary, and so forth. But we think it's the best work being done now. And we think there is a freshness of vision, and if a number of very intelligent artists decide to embark on investigating pictorial ideas like this, then there must be something going on. And we feel very genuine enthusiasm about it. We're wise and mature perceivers. I think we've identified some very, very important artists. It's a significant movement.

When an artist who walks in off the street, or far more frequently, who is mentioned to the dealer by one of his affiliated artists, proves to be more than merely interesting, "if he really rouses us up," as one dealer said, then the investigation of the artist will be taken a step further.

Out of fifty artists that we see during the week, we'll go to see three or four studios at the end of the week. We'll say, this guy looks awfully good, let's go to his studio. And I'll go or [my assistant] will go and visit the artist in his studio. Often, it doesn't look as good as it did in the photographs, but if it holds up, we'll proceed to the next stage. If we can, we'll try to schedule the artist [for an invitational show].

The SoHo dealer usually has his exhibition schedule worked out a full year in advance, sometimes two years. The larger commercial galleries have eighteen to twenty-five affiliated artists who expect, and whom the dealer expects, to show at about eighteen month intervals. Special exhibitions and invitational group shows of unaffiliated artists fill up gaps in



the gallery calendar. Dealers will try to schedule an exciting unknown artist into one of their invitational group shows, which are usually held at the end of the season, the slack period which coincides with the summer vacations of the buyers. These invitational shows allow the dealer to gauge the public reaction to the artist's work without having to commit the gallery to an extended affiliation with the artist.

It may sometimes happen that a delay of six months or a year in showing an artist will allow other artists to establish themselves in the same style and become the focus of attention. Artists working within the competitive and fast-paced New York market may discover that they are innovating along parallel lines. Where the parallelism is close, the artist who is the last to exhibit may have difficulty establishing a place within the style. Dealers sensitive to this problem may help an artist stake out his territory by mounting a show of the artist's work earlier than would ordinarily be the case. "Now, if an artist looks incredibly good," one such dealer said, "and it seems important that the work be seen right away for his own sake, in other words, that his vision not be preempted, then we'll try to get it shown as fast as we can."

Of course, the field covered by the artists in any one gallery is itself a territory, and the dealer may be accused of allotting areas to his artists based upon the interest of the gallery alone. In the spirit of rationalizing labor, one dealer told an abstract artist to stay with it. The gallery had enough realists, he explained, and "You're my abstract person."

### *The Packaging of Styles*

The SoHo galleries that have been most successful in finding new markets for American painters have done so by aggressively promoting trends in art. If a trend and its leaders are recognized and raised to public prominence under the sponsorship of one gallery, other galleries will follow by promoting the new style with lesser exemplars of their own, and critics will be obliged to review the work of significant artists of that school. As one long-time SoHo artist describes this tactic, "The galleries who control the scene down here do it by getting the other galleries to promote their trend. They set up the initial shows. Then, everything is more coherent. There's less risk for buyers, and it's easier for critics to see what they should review. They are ignorant and conservative anyway, and take to consensus opinions." Dealers hope, moreover, that by establishing the trend as a discernible parameter for the guidance of collectors they will also be in a position to identify its true exponents and persuade them to form an affiliation with their galleries.

Dealers occasionally manage to transform a tendency among some artists into a named and defined trend or movement. For example, Louis

Meisel, a young dealer from Madison Avenue who moved to a SoHo gallery in 1973, opened with a collection of works consisting exclusively of photo realism. Meisel was clarifying the outlines of a movement exhibited earlier at other SoHo galleries, but doing so in a big way. He was hoping to capture a leading place as its sales representative. Meisel discussed the organization of his opening exhibition in its handsomely printed catalog.

In the fall of 1972 Stuart Speiser informed me that he was interested in assisting the arts both through legal innovation, in his capacity as an attorney, and also through direct involvement as a collector and patron. His special interest was realism, as was mine. I made the following proposal:

I asked him to commission me to assemble a collection of the best Photo-Realists. The method was to be unrestricted commissions for the artists, and the result was to be a semi-public collection which would be made available to museums throughout the world. The idea of a theme had occurred to me several times in the past few years for a number of reasons. The idea of aviation as a theme came about as a result of Mr. Speiser's interest in aviation. He is one of the country's foremost aviation and aero-space attorneys, as well as having flown numerous airplanes, and is also a collector of aviation art and memorabilia. I felt that the airplane was not unrelated to the imagery which interested many of the Photo-Realists, and after discussing the idea with about ten of the artists, and finding no resistance, but only an interest in the added problems, I adopted the theme concept.

It was emphasized to the artists that we wanted a major work which would be consistent with their work in 1973. The theme was of secondary interest. Each one does include something to do with aviation, but upon seeing each one separately, the viewer would not realize that there was a commissioned theme.<sup>4</sup>

None of the works in Meisel's exhibition were for sale. He gambled that if he could appropriate a trend for his gallery and publicize it in such a way that critics and ultimately buyers couldn't ignore it, buyers would come to the gallery on a steady, long-term basis. Publicity was to be achieved not only by ads in art magazines and full-color brochures, but by scheduling the show for a subsequent tour. Galleries and museum curators in the smaller cities and universities frequently call on SoHo dealers to provide them with work for exhibitions. In this case, Meisel had packaged for distribution a large exhibit of twenty-two major works, complete with interpretative literature.

This type of cultural dissemination insures that an art development that originates in New York, or whose practitioners migrate there, spreads rapidly across the country through networks of galleries affiliated with SoHo dealers and through the more adventurous small



museums. This may occur before the major museums have gotten around to including the new style in their periodic shows of new material, but they cannot thereafter forever ignore the well-disseminated trend.

### *Dealing and Collecting*

SoHo dealers, then, accelerate the developments they observe in the artist community and persuade critics, patrons, and museums to reinforce these developments by adding their institutional certification. This publicity and the widening basis of support it mobilizes becomes the leverage with which the dealer creates a place in the art market for the new trend, and with it, for his artists.

Those who get in on the ground floor—the patrons who subsidize a new movement, the artists who become historically linked to its inception, and the galleries which sponsor and affiliate with those artists—all benefit if the publicity strikes a responsive cord, and the trend, one of the many that are emerging or dissipating among artists at any one time, coalesces as a fixture on the art-world landscape.<sup>5</sup>

The major SoHo galleries are those which have succeeded in identifying themselves with a new turn in art and in raising it to prominence. As they affiliate themselves with its major artistic figures, they simultaneously help to determine who these figures are to be. In this process museums and the critics are maneuvered into providing broader institutional exposure and support. The major collectors linked to the gallery are the first to be given a chance to buy and so to subscribe to the new art. Depending as much on their evaluation of the dealer's perspicacity as on their evaluation of the art itself, they make their decisions on early purchase. The dealer himself almost certainly is among these early buyers. Dealers rely upon their inside track for purchasing the best pieces by the pacesetters of a movement in order to make their personal fortunes. Lesser galleries and lesser buyers can be trusted to follow an established trend, usually creating support for the works of artists more peripheral to the now-delineated movement.

Leo Castelli, often considered the shrewdest among SoHo's leading dealers, acquired his top stable of artists in his pre-SoHo days. These include Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Claes Oldenburg. Castelli accomplished this by making the decision in 1957 to support the then emerging pop art, while the rest of the market remained loyal to abstract expressionism. Castelli says his wealth is based on the fact that dealing has allowed him to collect art, though he modestly declares he bought works that were left over from

shows and which no one else wanted. At the first Johns exhibition in 1958, which Castelli helped arrange at the Museum of Modern Art, everything was sold to the museum benefactors, who were offered the first crack at them, except one, a blue and yellow target with a row of dismembered body parts set in boxes. The piece was considered too sexually frank for the museum to acquire for itself, and Castelli finally bought it from the artist for \$1200; he recently turned down an offer to purchase it for \$400,000.<sup>6</sup>

The collections which dealers accumulate are often used to generate publicity for a new art movement. They are "reinvested" by being lent free for other exhibitions. As both collectors and traders, dealers focus the attention of the market and its other participants—magazine critics, museum curators, buyers, and even the artists—on a limited number of art developments. Dealers prune the chaotic possibilities inherent in the artist community to strengthen a limited number of developments. These then can be analysed in the art press, honored by museums, and coveted by collectors. In a market whose only philosophical consensus is a commitment to modernism—that is, to the value of transcending conventions—there is no other market element that can perform the function of establishing coherence but those dealers close enough to the artists and the point of artistic production. One SoHo dealer summarized the process.

Publicity is the key. I advertise and spend a lot of money on it. [Not every dealer] does this. For example, I get a page in *Art in America* and pay \$1000 an issue. I lend to museums. I have 300 pieces on loan now. This is a big headache. There's a lot of work—making sure insurance is okay, that things are kept track of. I use one artist to get another [into a museum exhibition]. I'm doing them a favor, I tell them. If a curator wants a big name, I ask them to take a look at a lesser artist as well. I don't twist their arms. I say, "Please, if you like the work take it too." They usually do. This builds up the résumés of the artists with lots of museum shows.

If the museums are kept supplied with front-line information on art developments by the dealers, so are the art magazines. The dealer quoted above continued,

The magazine people come around, with no idea of what to do three issues down the line. Many dealers hide. They see only an ad salesman. But I talk to them. I give them ideas, and presto, I've got a cover story and 26 pages in *Art in America*. In eight years and 100 shows, I have never had a word in the *New York Times*. I always thought that they couldn't be bought. But for this show [the artist] insisted on an



ad there, and I said, if you want one, you pay for it. And she did. Now we'll see. I don't like the idea of buying coverage, but if you have to do it, I would to promote my artists.

One problem with promotionally accelerated art movements is the rapidity with which they may succeed one another, leaving the market closed and cold to all but the established leadership. Dealers don't promote out of thin air, of course. They follow the existing contours of developments they observe among artists they know and respect. And they try to prevent confusion and charges of "ahistoricism" from the critics and curators by elaborating links between the new movement they invest in and the fine art of the past. Each new trend is construed as following a developmental logic. Art commentators and custodians, concerned with a coherent art history, are offered the new movement within a context of analysis by the dealers. Explained one SoHo dealer,

I'm promoting abstract illusionism. The Taft Museum was setting up a show—strictly nineteenth-century illusionism—and I suggested to them that they tie it in with contemporary pieces. I showed them the logical steps of the development—nineteenth-century realism, *trompe l'oeil*—the historical flow. This gave them the idea for an exciting show.

Not everyone will see [this show], but it builds [abstract illusionism]. I lose money on things like this. I often have to pay the shipping. But my artists are in, and in five years it will help. They can look back and say, that was the show that started it all. And [my artists] were in it. These shows at museums are a useful tool.

An activist role in the market does not guarantee that a dealer perceives which developments are rooted in the enduring commitments of truly talented artists, and which are merely fads. Neither can the use of publicity replace the ballet-like timing that a dealer may need in order to anticipate the tastes of the market. Dealers do go broke, are forced to sell off their collections, and are reduced to selling antique furniture in their galleries.

But it remains true that major dealers rely on the same strategic maneuvers: (1) They co-opt and concretize an art development of genuine concern to producing artists; they try to sign up its leading practitioners and may name the movement so as to lay better claim to it. (2) They accelerate the rate at which other art organizations, chiefly museums and art magazines, become aware of the new movement, and they use the attention of these institutions as evidence of broad support for the movement. In lectures and in their publicity, dealers help fashion the intellectual defense of the movement. (3) Dealers take the recognition given the movement they underwrite as certification of its importance,

and present the buyers with this certification. Using their own purchasing initiative and that of preferred customers who have their confidence, the dealers prime and cultivate market demand for the new work.

### *Selling to Clients*

The customers who spend substantial amounts for contemporary art are but a handful of the total buyers, and consequently SoHo dealers must encourage many new middle-class buyers. Dealers hope to convert the occasional customer into at least a modest collector, one who will have a long-term commitment to the dealer's artists and thus his gallery. Dealers prefer to work with collectors, not only because they buy more and their purchasing can be channeled into support of the style which the gallery sponsors, but also because the collector is a secondary sales agent. Collectors socialize with one another, compete at auctions, and influence each other's buying determinations. Hoping to place their acquisitions within the center of the market, collectors have an interest in reaching a consensus among themselves.

Dealers assess their clients in terms of the prominence and influence of their collections and offer those who assemble the more important collections cheaper prices and longer payment terms. Castelli suggests that his prices vary for a particular work, depending on his friendship with the purchaser, the distinction of the purchaser and his collection, and the frequency of his purchases.<sup>7</sup> According to Larry Fleishman, a partner in Kennedy Galleries, "Big museums will pay 20 percent below the market, but my best collectors are like museums to me. I try to keep them happy."<sup>8</sup>

Dealers also favor their best customers by making available to them the gallery's most important art pieces. "Placement" of such pieces in prominent showcases is the most prudent tactic the dealer has for maximizing the impact of a piece, to the career advantage of the artist and of his sales agent. Explained one SoHo dealer,

Buyers have to buy a lot, they have to be serious about building a collection, or I won't place important works with them. Placing is important for the career development of artists. If someone came in and wanted to buy an important picture off the wall, I'd first ask, "Who are you? Do you understand the responsibility of ownership?" They'd have to be willing to lend to museums. They'd have to be the kind of people who talk with other collectors so that each will buy each other's things. I don't want a piece to simply disappear.

SoHo dealers compete in making themselves available and gracious to new gallery visitors who are contemplating a first purchase. Like many



of the artists they see, buyers are often unknowns. First encounters, handled correctly, can pay off in the emergence of a new collector who adopts the gallery's aesthetic coordinates. Giving the brush-off to someone taken for a small-fry buyer can be a mistake. A SoHo dealer tells the following cautionary tale:

An anesthesiologist, five years out of Czechoslovakia, accompanied by his wife, an art historian or would like to be, went to [one of the top SoHo galleries]. They had \$20,000 and were doing well, and told the receptionist they wanted to see [the gallery director]. The girl at the desk said she'd take care of them, but they insisted on seeing [the director] and said they wanted to buy a [prominent artist in the pop art movement]. Finally, [the director] came out and right off the bat asked, "How much can you spend?" They said "\$20,000," and he said, "You know, you can only get a water color or a drawing for that," and he went over to the girl, whispered in her ear, and went off to his back room. Without even a "Goodbye" or a "Thank you." She came over and said, "[The director] asked me to show you some water colors and drawings."

They told me all this after they had been buying here for a while. Here it was a different story. They had a drink upstairs, asked to see a studio, and I called up [a top painter with the gallery]. She obliged. Months later, they bought. They've spent \$180,000 in two years. I've sent them to [a different SoHo dealer] for some things they needed for a valid collection.

Dealers socialize with their clients at the point of sale and in the more diffuse surroundings of charity affairs. The latter, held for such causes as "saving Venice from sinking," are sponsored by dealers to generate good will. "The art world is all my time, really," said one dealer, "social, business, and spare time. But I do race hydroplanes. That's the only time I get away from the art world and into middle America. But I got into it through [the painter son of a painter father]. Otherwise, my social life and my conversation are all the art world."

Because socializing and sales are so closely linked, several dealers have renovated large lofts next to their SoHo galleries in which they can hold charity parties and entertain individual customers. At the home of a representative SoHo dealer, a client will be dined, asked to play pool with the host, and ultimately seated on a semicircular banquette facing a wall thirty feet away on which is hung the particular painting the dealer intends to sell that evening. It is usually the client himself who brings the conversation around to the work in question.

Major dealers are always collectors, and their homes reflect this. Ivan Karp and his wife display a collection in their SoHo loft which includes

American salt-glazed crocks, nineteenth-century landscape and portrait paintings, twentieth-century painting and sculpture, art nouveau and art deco sculpture, antique kitchen and carpentry tools, turn-of-the-century tableware, commemorative spoons, Coca-Cola trays, and more.<sup>9</sup> Another SoHo dealer has displayed in his loft, besides a portion of his 800 personally owned paintings, Victorian glass and silver objects, the world's largest collection of "Fiestaware" table china, traveling cosmetic cases from several centuries, and antique desks.

Dealers seem to be addicted to collecting. It is not merely the desire to own and display objects that moves them to collect. They like to play the market in anything "collectible." One dealer offered a free hint on the next collectibles boom, old group photographs, and invited his listeners to get in early.

They have to be, like with any of these boomlets, of some aesthetic interest, placeable by period, and perhaps historically important. They can then derive a nostalgic or an historical value. You have to buy them cheap—after the word gets out, prices will go up and you stop buying. I told [another SoHo dealer] about this and [he] bought 300 of these historical group photos. I don't know where he could have gotten them.

This dabbling in collectibles is, of course, a busman's holiday. The dealers are playing, half seriously, with the skills they use in their fine-art dealing. They pioneer the delineation of a field for collecting, buying up the bargains. Then they spread the word to others to accelerate the demand. When the market peaks, they sell. They appear to be as enamored with the game itself as with the possibilities of gain.

Dealers generate a contagious atmosphere by their constant and, as they report, profitable trading ventures. In the dealer's gallery, and even more so in his home, the client is exposed to a persuasive example of the advantages of buying art. Ensnared in art-laden surroundings and told exemplary tales of the profits and excitement upon to those who buy art, the client is tempted to identify with the evident success and pleasure of the dealer. If he will seize the bargain presented to him, he may, with the dealer, share in the next art boom.

Fine art, often beautiful and always displayable as decoration, is also interpreted to the client as a socially important legacy of which the buyer becomes custodian. The buyer is offered, then, a variety of gratifications that differs significantly from the unleavened appeal to greed which attracts, for example, commodity traders of futures in frozen pork bellies. Along with feeling perceptive and shrewd, the art purchaser can also feel socially responsible.

This layering of motives—profit, status, beauty, and altruism—is



sometimes exploited by the dealer. One dealer, who in the last year reported that he had placed eighty paintings in museums—more than he had sold to private collectors—explained the multilayer approach to art clients. He uses the gift-donation system. As a dealer, he lines up a benefactor who wants a particular painting. The benefactor is induced to make an offer of an equivalent work by the same artist to a museum, a gift which is tax-deductible. The price for the latter work is doubled. The benefactor pays the artist, donates the work to a museum, and collects his tax deduction on 100 percent of the doubled price. Then the artist, having been paid twice his usual and established fee, “gives” the originally desired piece to the benefactor without charge. The museum, usually chronically short in its acquisitions budget, gets a significant piece of art. The artist gets additional exposure and may be able to raise his previously established prices. The donor gets his art and his tax break, while the dealer collects his commission. Everything is legal, and sweetened with altruism.

### *On Managing Artists*

Dealers try to maintain as much flexibility as possible in their commitments to particular avant-garde styles and artists. The pace of artistic innovation is rapid, and the danger of stylistic obsolescence is always real. To cope with the rapid changes in the field of contemporary art, the dealer is ready to emphasize, when appropriate, that his professional commitment is to the art and not the artist. Explained one dealer,

We're loyal more to the artist's work than to the artist. In other words, we don't commit ourselves to a personality so much as to his performance. We try to keep neutral that way. And as long as the artist's work is interesting, we continue to exhibit it.

We'll show an artist's work as long as we like it. And we don't say, “You're fired!” at a certain point if the work is not good. We'll say, “We can't show the work right now, it doesn't look just right to us. You can show it later if it's good.” Of course, that sometimes disgruntles an artist. An artist who has had two or three one-man shows expects to show regularly. But we just don't do that. We show only the work that consistently looks interesting and engaging or provocative, or, you know, of interest. For us, the artist's performance is very important from event to event. We won't show an artist just because he's a sentimental favorite. We really have to like the work.

The notion that the dealer's commitment is to the work and not the artist finds its most useful moment when an affiliated artist declares to his dealer that he's ready to show, and the dealer tells him he's not. The dealer must communicate the nonarbitrary basis of his decision so as not

to drive the artist out of the gallery permanently. The dealer stands for higher standards in art, he must assure himself, than the artist might follow on his own. One dealer illustrated this function of maintaining standards and the problems it raises with dealers whose self-evaluation differs from that of the dealer.

We have a very loyal group here, and we treat them with great courtesy. But we have turmoil, too. We had an artist this week who announced to me that he was prepared to leave the gallery, and I asked him why he wanted to leave. He said, “Well, you didn't like my work this year.” “But,” I said, “I've given you three one-man shows and you've done quite nicely here, and here I've rejected your work for this season—maybe I'll like it next season. Why do you want to leave?” Well, his feelings were hurt and he felt terrible. He'd never been rejected before. He was singularly hurt, and it was basically an act of self-spite that he decided to withdraw from the gallery.

And I convinced him not to withdraw. I said, “Let's keep looking and see how it goes, you know. Maybe next year everything will blaze with glory for us.” He said, “Well, you're misconceiving these works; you're not reading them.” And I said, “Well, we have to show what we're really committed to, what we really like, and it's senseless for us to put on exhibitions just because we think you're a fine fellow. We really have to like the work, and we have to relate to the art, rather than to the person.” Well, he seemed to understand that, to a certain extent, and we came to a sort of mellow understanding that he wouldn't retire from the gallery and that we'd keep looking at his work and hope that we'd both come to a happy moment again.

The dealer's confidence in his definitive role as a judge of aesthetic value is necessary if he is to sort out the market. In resisting the pressure of artists for self-inclusive definitions of what is significant in art, the dealer must be willing to make categorical decisions. Prior to the critics, the collectors, and the museums, it is the dealer who decides whether a work is interesting enough to merit exhibition, or if it is to be ignored by the whole institutionalized art world.

Dealers describe their role in the art market to new artists in passive terms. They say that they are there to recognize the few distinguished and important works which occur among the many that are neither. They can only hope, they explain, that the wider art public will confirm their evaluation of a new talent by praising the buying those of his works which they exhibit. But dealers emphasize that they are in a risky business and that very often an artist's early promise and his dealer's enthusiasm find no sympathetic echo in the market. Such a fatalistic view of his position in the market is useful to the dealer who must reconcile an unknown artist to modest prices for his work and to the typical 50 percent commission charged when the work is sold.



The more established artists expect the dealer to be more active in the market, and dealers will accordingly offer their services to those artists who are proven sellers with a different argument. To these artists, the dealer represents himself as a successful promoter. As one dealer said,

I don't just hang them on the wall. I promote their careers. With [one of my best selling painters], when she started with me she got \$3000 [per picture] and was not really known. Now, she's in 112 museums and she gets \$30,000. I emphasize public relations. I get my artists into museums within one year and get them an article, if not a cover, in an [art] magazine. I work for this.

With the successful artist, the dealer has more room to be an active agent, concerned not so much with simply selling his work as with placing it in those public or private collections where it will have the highest visibility and the most status enhancement. The successful artist has, of course, a different market position than the unknown. Other dealers are anxious to accept such an artist into their own galleries and may already be ingratiating themselves with the artist so as to lay the groundwork for a "raid."

Many of the material and psychological services which dealers offer to their established artists are designed to strengthen their loyalty to the gallery and to the dealer. Many of these dealer services are financial and professional. "I'm trying to work out a complete plan for my artists to get Blue Cross and accounting services," said one dealer, "and, if they have money, investment counseling." Others reveal a strategy of encouraging the personal dependency of the artist upon the dealer, the very dependency and personalism which the dealer repudiates as unprofessional in his relationships with lesser known artists.

At 3 A.M. I will get a call from [one of the highest priced artists in my gallery]—he can't work, he's upset. I reassure him. Though he's the most successful of the realists, he's the least secure personally. This is a big drain on me, but I'm glad to do this. For another artist, I had him live with me for a month, I got him off the bottle and settled down and working.

A dealer would have to be exceptionally insistent on drawing the line if he wanted to resist the role of therapist and confidant which some artists thrust on their dealers. Few dealers can resist its advantages.

You can find yourself developing relationships with artists which are based on sentimental affection. There are many pitfalls in this. I should not come to that, but you know, it's a family scene, and you may automatically find yourself in the relation of a maternal or pater-

nal guide. Now some dealers aren't really mentally or psychologically equipped for that, but you find yourself obliged to take that role. And some of us are reasonably equipped to play a strong leadership kind of a thing. It works out okay.

The list of services performed by dealers for their successful artists is extensive, and its emphasis on personality-propping suggests that artists are not reluctant to exploit the role of the gifted but demanding child.

For one artist, I reorganized a land deal he had made. He had bought an old lumber mill to live and work in, with his family, but there was no one else around. There was no one for his kids to play with or for his wife to talk to. So I restructured it as a co-op for five artists and their families. This solved the isolation. He didn't seem to know how to go about doing it, even if he could have conceived of the idea.

Dealers simplify daily life for those of their artists who demand these services, thus allowing them to act as if their creativity were a license exempting them from sordid, commercial details. "I handle car payments, rents, advances, divorces," said a dealer, "so that if an artist wants, he need only pick up a paint brush and not balance his own check book at all. This does take a great deal of trust. It is for these reasons that many dealers do not want to handle living artists and contemporary art."

The dealer wants to be friendly and fair with his or her artists, and sympathetic and emotionally supportive. The dealer must sustain their belief in both the objectivity of his judgment and his personal interest in them. The typical tie between the artist and a gallery of affiliation is not a long-term exclusive contract but a diffuse conviction that, for personal and economic reasons, the dealer is indeed working on the artist's behalf. Belief in the dealer's obligation to him bonds the artist to the dealer. The perception of a personal loyalty, of course, operates within a wider market context of external pressure from the many artists seeking dealer affiliation and the artist's expectation that the dealer will boost his career. Given these considerations, a mutual if qualified trust usually develops between artist and dealer.

If the artist likes the way we exhibit his work and the way we describe it and everything else, then maybe he'll stay with us. If he feels that we haven't been serving him, he or she might leave. There's no rigid arrangement that way. We don't have any contractual arrangements with artists where we say "You're our man and you can't go anywhere else." It's based on what you call mutual faith.

These relationships may, of course, be strained from time to time, as when an unknown artist is accepted into the gallery for further trial and



is scheduled to be a part of a group show with the gallery's established artists. Successful artists may feel that a grouping with an unknown or a lesser known artist is a challenge to their achieved status within the gallery and the art world. So peer conscious are established artists that some have left galleries and taken their future work to new dealers in order to protect their reputations from this status contamination. Dealers, however, guard their right to offer new talent its chance. Explained one dealer,

They can't hold leaving over my head to get some concession or other. "I don't want my things shown with this somebody else," they say to me. This somebody else may be an unknown. I tell them, "You were young, give him a chance." I have a tryout policy, you see. One thousand artists come by in a year to show me slides. I look at their work in their studios maybe in fifty cases each year. Five will measure up. This five I will bring into the gallery [in separate group shows], and eventually four will have to go. One will hold up. It is this one that a top artist may resent being shown with. That's too bad. That's my end of the business.

### *Innovation, Inflation, and the Gallery System*

The prerogative of the dealer to introduce unknown artists to the market represents the heart of the gallery system. The search for new talent and its ultimate incorporation into the gallery keeps the gallery alive. When the gallery exhibits unknown artists whom the dealer has certified as having major promise, buyers of art are persuaded to invest in the rising value of the artist's reputation, in anticipation of a substantial appreciation in the value of what they buy. As art lovers, such buyers also have the opportunity of sharing in the discovery of a major talent and so demonstrating the sharpness of their aesthetic perceptions. It is this raising of unknowns into wide acceptance and the accompanying rapid increase in the prices of their work that constitute the gallery system. Dealers have to be accessible to new talent in order to keep the cycle of renewal alive, despite the understandable wishes of some established artists to freeze the process at a point advantageous to themselves.

Bringing new artists into the gallery at regular intervals not only lets the dealer offer his clients bargain pieces prior to their price appreciation, but it also allows the dealer to speculate in inexpensive acquisitions for the gallery. The dealer's own collection, so useful in publicizing art trends when lent out and in priming the market, also has uses in regulating the exchange between dealer and artist and in capitalizing the gallery. Pieces in the dealer's collection constitute a kind of currency which augments the often scanty cash reserves of the gallery.

The purchase of work from affiliated artists also solves the often difficult problem of stipends. During periods when the sales of an artist's work don't meet his expenses, the dealer's offer to purchase is appreciated. Many dealers and artists prefer such purchases to stipends or advances of money charged against future sales because the purchase is less entangling. The dealer will pay the same price as the artist has established by his most recent sales, or perhaps a lower one, and if the work appreciates suddenly, a large profit is possible for the dealer.

### *The Barter Trade*

Recently, dealers have begun to trade paintings directly for merchandise, dental care, psychiatric counseling, and tax advice—as, indeed, have artists themselves. When one dealer, who had opened his first gallery in 1967 in the uptown art district, moved to SoHo after five successful years, he had accumulated from one to five works of each artist he had represented, a total of well over 500 pieces. "This expresses my confidence in them," he explained, pointing out that some other dealers do not take such risks. In SoHo he renovated an obsolete industrial space to create his gallery and living space, using only \$15,000 in cash, which was all he had. For most of his purchases and expenses, he traded paintings. All his furniture, including an Eames chair, a delicatessen refrigerator with glass sliding doors, and a marble bathroom, are the fruit of such bartering. There are art collectors among the purveyors of furniture and appliances who find trading for art more profitable than buying it. The largest of these issue virtual "Sears catalogs" of merchandise from which those owning art can choose. "If you want a thousand dollars in appliances," explained the art dealer, "you make a selection, deduct the 20 percent discount which is a wholesale courtesy, and trade him \$800 in paintings." The artist or dealer who trades his art avoids sales taxes, and is able to distribute pieces that might not otherwise be readily sold. The dentist, paint store owner, or large collector who barter is able to enjoy the satisfactions of the patron's role and to absorb the cost into business overhead.

### *Conclusion*

The study of SoHo's art market supports the contention that the locus of creativity includes the entrepreneurial initiatives of the art dealer. The development of the SoHo community and its galleries has coincided with specific changes in the art world—the growth and openness of the market since abstract expressionism, the introduction of a new contemporary art buyer who seeks artistic coordinates from the market itself, and



the absence of any single critical definition of what is important avant-garde art or theory—and the result of these changes has been to elevate the dealer to the central position as arbiter of taste in fine art.

The elevation of the dealer role is possible because the critical function in the art world has devolved. What is common to all the newer styles and movements—earthworks, minimal art, conceptual art, the random scattering of found objects, and the appropriation of nonartistic “reality” into art in the form of commercial iconography and the photograph-like representation of the everyday—is an emancipation of the work of art from control by the professional critic. Either the work can be immediately apprehended in nonaesthetic terms, or else the artist or the dealer has taken on the function of generating the conceptual wrapping which makes the hole in a Nevada desert, the plywood box, the stacked railroad ties, or the pile of felt waste “art.” In either case, the critic as a powerful and autonomous participant in the dialogue about art has taken a beating. The new art found in SoHo is frequently either material speaking for itself or concepts defined at some length by the artist and illustrated by intrinsically uninteresting material. The gallery installations present the art objects in their untainted accessibility as “reality” or propped by explanations which are themselves “meta-art.”

Critics believe that this claim of art to be its own critic or to be beyond criticism stems from an aggrandizement of the artist figure into what I call the “celebrity artist.” Celebrity artists presume to operate in the spirit of Andy Warhol’s reply to the question “Why is *The Chelsea Girls* art?” Said Warhol, “Well, first of all, it was made by an artist, and, second, that would come out as art.”<sup>10</sup> Writes critic Harold Rosenberg, “Actually, the artist who has left art behind or—what amounts to the same thing—who regards anything he makes or does as art, is an expression of the profound crisis that has overtaken arts in our epoch. Painting, sculpture, drama, music, have been undergoing a process of de-definition. The nature of art has become uncertain. At least, it is ambiguous. No one can say with assurance what a work of art is—or, more important, what is not a work of art. Where an art object is still present, as in painting, it is what I have called an anxious object: it does not know whether it is a masterpiece or junk.”<sup>11</sup>

The SoHo data indicates that what has actually taken place is that art has become unabashedly an entrepreneurial field. Some artists, celebrity artists, have become entrepreneurs as well as artists, either through showmanship or by articulating their own theories about art, their own context of interpretation. The celebrity artist may use a dealer, but only as a representative, and will conduct his or her own salesmanship and conceptual defense.

For most artists fortunate enough to be shown in a SoHo gallery, the dealer functions as their impresario. It is the dealer who spins out a

mantle of legitimating commentary on the lecture circuit and in gallery publications. It is the dealer acting as market entrepreneur who collects investors, solicits external critical commentary and press coverage, and orchestrates the fact and the appearance of a concerted art-world movement, as distinguished from an artists’ movement. Where the critical function is not usurped by the dealer or the celebrity artist, it must compete with a new kind of commentary that is essentially descriptive journalism, in which the review of a gallery show approximates the movie review in being a guide to the enjoyable consumption of an experience rather than a theoretical critique. Press attention, then, becomes something distinguishable from critical attention; the first can be sufficient to enable the art work to survive the second.

Dealers, consequently, are the gatekeeper figures in the SoHo market for all but those artists who act as dealers on their own behalf, and only the celebrity artists can succeed at this game. For the unknown artist seeking sales and exposure, there is no realistic alternative to a professional dealer. For the artist wishing career management, the dealer is the most widely used and effective agent. In the creation of artistic culture, dealers are coparticipants rather than mere administrators of the market. As Richard Peterson has pointed out, the infrastructure between cultural producers and consumers is not a neutral mechanism in a market society.<sup>12</sup> Dealers make their selections prior to the review of art collectors, public and private, and it is their gallery exhibitions that become the interface between the artist and the critic. Other institutions of the art world, organized to consolidate rather than to challenge new artistic directions, are used to amplify the consequences of the dealer’s selection of art and art movements, to reaffirm the dealer’s own judgment as the most definitive statement about what is important in contemporary art.



# 4

## The Unsuccessful SoHo Artist

### *The Social Psychology of an Occupation*

#### *Sources of the Artistic Commitment and the Differentiation of Self as Artist*

Looking back, SoHo artists locate the source of their career decision in their childhood experiences with art. They were talented children. Many report that in grammar school they had the ability to "copy anything." While their parents and teachers occasionally applauded this interest in art, the children felt insufficiently supported. Art provided the vehicle for both their rebellion and their legitimate achievement, and it took the place of intense peer-group socialization. The developing sense of self became identified with art. "From as far back as I can remember," said one painter, characteristically, "I always felt I was an artist."

As children, these artists shied away from the majority of their school companions, who did not understand their interests, and they often reported keeping the seriousness of their interest in art to themselves. "I never felt a part of the student crowd in high school," a collagist explained. "I was too out of it to work on school art projects like the yearbook. When I got praise sometimes for work I did for art teachers, they would say, 'You could be a fine illustrator.' But I thought of myself as an artist. That is a prime example of how school tries to lower your expectations of yourself."

An early sense of vocation combined with a lack of empathy from those around them caused the young artists to be acutely self-



conscious. "I used to wear a long raincoat everywhere," said a photographer whose childhood talent had not been encouraged. "I felt I was hiding." A further retreat into art soothed this consciousness of being different. A painter recalled, "Art was an escape from teenage things—dances, dates, the changes in my body. I was convinced that I and my twin sister were ugly. We had acne. Thinking back, I guess everybody did. But I would draw with my sister for hours in the basement of our house."

Once an artistic self-concept was made available to these children by parents or school, and it meshed with evident talent, the social anxieties that accompany childhood were turned into support for the artist identity. "I had the romantic idea," said one painter, "that the artist was also a misfit, and it was easy to identify with them."

### *Parental Pressure*

For most SoHo artists, the usual stresses of childhood were complicated not only by an ability and interest in art but also by parental opposition to that interest. Typically, their parents came from the more modest managerial, business, and professional segments of the middle class.<sup>1</sup> They sought to steer their children, sons and daughters alike, into economically sound professional or business careers. Fine arts was not perceived to be an acceptable alternative. In seeking to become artists, the children had to break away from the influence of their parents, who considered the arts an economically irresponsible choice.<sup>2</sup> Many of the artists recall with bitterness that their parents, especially their fathers, used the strongest psychological and financial leverage to get them out of fine arts and into more practical occupations. Some fathers stopped speaking to sons for years after they chose art over a place in the family business. Parents cut off tuition payments in the middle of the academic year for children who had switched to art programs, thus forcing them out of school. Resisting such pressure required, and perhaps fostered, substantial strength of will.

Although they were aware of their talents early in life, SoHo artists backed into their vocational commitments gradually, first denying the seriousness of their interest to their parents, then defiantly defending their identities when pressured, and finally sabotaging other career possibilities. They might, for example, flunk out of business courses or teacher-training programs in college and then go on to win full scholarships as art majors. The process of freeing themselves from their parents' expectations sometimes occurred earlier than college. One SoHo painter said of his youth,

In [grammar] school I was lauded for my ability to copy pictures. I was very good at it. They sent me to a separate room sometimes to copy magazine pictures. They really didn't know what else to do with me. You see, I was a bad scholar. I was always forgetting my books. Once I did this every day for two months in spite of writing notes to myself and putting my books inside my coat at night. And I was late all the time. I was good in art so I guess I felt I could be bad in other ways.

The artists traced their parents' restrictive definitions of permissible career possibilities to a materialism they had assumed in response to business setbacks or difficulties in upward mobility. These parents were harsh critics of their own financial performance, judging it against that of more successful relatives or in the light of their own earlier ambitions. Haunted by this standard, these financially comfortable families were tense with status strain.

To cope with a business decline or a difficult career climb, the parents of these artists had turned to hard work, self-discipline, and self-denial to attain what they considered to be economic respectability. They considered their art-prone children to be not merely foolish but also indifferent to the meaning of parental sacrifice. Relations between the young artists and their parents, particularly, as has been said, their fathers, were therefore often bitter. The following are fairly typical recollections by artists of parental opposition and the conflict that resulted:

My father was wealthy until I was ten. I started out in private schools and summer camps. Then the money was lost. This was hidden from me to some extent, but I knew, of course. My mother had to go to work. We moved several times to cheaper neighborhoods. Later, my father got his business back on its feet. He never thought I'd follow through in art. He thought I'd become a businessman. When he finally realized I intended to be a sculptor, he stopped speaking to me. Even now, we usually communicate through my mother.

My mother had been on the stage before she got married, but my father was a fireman. He saved his money and finally bought a home-furnishings store with a partner, but I don't think he ever felt he was successful. And I've never felt close to him. My being an artist hasn't helped.

I grew up in a town of five thousand in rural Ohio. It was without any cultural facilities at all. My mother was a hobby sketcher. She always gave me the feeling that she felt she was wasting her life there. She taught kindergarten and would talk a lot about the talent of her



kids, talent that was going to be socialized out of them. My father taught, too. He had been in a few bad business deals and had become too much of a miser to spend any money on art lessons for me, or that kind of thing. Miser was his middle name.

My father was a frustrated pianist. He never touched the piano while I was growing up, though. He tried to steer me away from art. . . . He ran a textile business, but I was always aware of his frustrated music interest from the stories I'd hear. Maybe that's the aspect of him that I wanted to latch onto. But there was no support for art at home. I was seen by my father as no way to make a living. . . . After my first year in art school, he and my stepmother withdrew the support they had promised me.

But some young artists did not make their way completely without solace. The mothers in a few of these homes were remembered as having provided some covert support for an interest in art. It was often the mother who gave a son his first box of paints or who encouraged a daughter to try to market a photograph. Those artists who in later years held successful shows and discovered that as known painters they could cash checks at art supply houses shared their success with their families by first informing their mothers.

In general, however, the childhood homes of these artists reflected little awareness of art, though they often contained antique furniture or ethnic mementos prized as embodying heritage rather than aesthetic value. Only one artist recalled that his parents ever entertained a fine artist at home, but there were relatives in the families of each of the artists who represented a genteel tradition of interest in the arts, usually in the form of hobby painting, the restoring of antiques, or career plans in music or the theater that were ended prematurely by marriage or financial necessity. It was highly memorable to one artist, for example, that stories were circulated in the family about her father's having had to abandon an early career with a dance band and turn to public school teaching in order to support his family. Another artist recalled that his aunts described his father, a clothing manufacturer, as a once promising pianist. The parents themselves usually did not volunteer this information to their children.

Artists seeking to evade parental pressure had the need to exaggerate these characteristics of unfulfilled parental promise. In one instance, an artist saw in her deceased mother, whom she had never known, a substantial lost drawing talent. Artists typically traced the present unhappiness which they saw in their parents—together with the ulcers, cramped emotional expression or stinginess—to a turn in the lives of their parents toward the single-minded pursuit of financial security. A mother's inter-

est in sketching or a father's in music were thought of as recessive characteristics, overwhelmed by economic considerations.

### *Art as an Affirmation of Middle-Class Culture*

SoHo artists did not rebel against their parents with clear consciences. They acted with the strength and limited objectives of survivors. They conformed to parental values in that they viewed their work in terms of a chosen career, and they protected their identities by attaching themselves to those aspects of family background that could be construed as supporting the quest of the artist. They were not bohemians, but rather hoped for economic respectability as a component of their artistic ambition. By holding that a person's identity resided in a vocation, a cumulative career achievement, they also agreed with the class perspective of their entrepreneurial or professional parents. But when art did not yield financial success, these artists interpreted vocation in expressive terms as a journey whose meaning lies in the progressive realization of the self. In their middle-class backgrounds, unsuccessful artists found the ideological material to transform a failed career into a successful "calling." As artists they were salvaging both their identities and their society from a reduction to the commercial values that seemed to have impoverished their parents' lives. Like their parents, who maintained the outlook and economies of the marginal professions and of small business in an era of corporate bureaucracies, the children chose in art one of the least bureaucratized, least rationalized, and most individualistic of occupations.

### *Failure in the Fine Arts*

Erving Goffman points out that even ascriptive identities are qualified by some degree of failure or ambiguity and so can be managed in a way which minimizes the repercussions of that failure.<sup>3</sup> Occupational identities, the result of achievement, exhibit the same characteristics of ambiguity and potential failure, and that of the artist more than most. In SoHo, where exhibition openings are highly visible, art prices are the stock of street gossip, and notices of foundation grants to artists appear in the local press, failure is all the more bitter by its ready contrast with success.

Success means two things to the young SoHo artist: critical recognition of an enduring nature and sufficient sales to allow the artist to work undisturbed by the need for a different job to maintain the middle-class



standards of his family. The artist does not want his children to visit their grandparents and be taken immediately on shopping trips for "decent clothes," an occurrence which is commonly remarked upon. Success in both income and recognition, however, appears to be so rare for the young artist that failure is converted into an occupational norm, and each artist must to struggle to maintain the belief that he or she is destined to be an exception.

### *Working to Support an Art Career*

Artists commonly believe that only 1 percent of serious aspirants will succeed. There are no reliable figures available because those who abandon their careers usually adopt another occupation and shed the "failed artist" identity. The census lists 15,374 painters and sculptors in the New York Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) in 1970.<sup>4</sup> Since the census excludes nonselling artists with independent financing and the many whose sideline jobs provide their incomes and census identities, this is a very conservative figure. It is estimated that each of the 160 galleries representing contemporary American artists in the New York market handles, on average, 18 artists at any one time.<sup>5</sup> There are thus 2,880 slots for galleried artists in the New York market. Since this is the central market for the country as a whole, some of these slots are filled by artists from outside the New York SMSA, and thus only about 18 percent of aspirants find places in galleries. Artists sell to friends, family, and old clients out of their studios, but it is considered impossible to make a living without representation through a dealer. The obverse, however, is not true. Dealers carry slow sellers and try out lesser knowns, with the result that only one in four galleried artists is a significant seller; 94 percent of all the artists in New York are not, then, significant sellers. Five percent of arrivals to the New York art market may succeed—a small number, but one which exceeds the pessimism of many artists.

The career choice of fine arts is difficult to defend on economic grounds. Artists typically earn low incomes and experience the stress of having to earn most of this income from either low-paying, casual work or from quasicareers which continually threaten to take over their fine art identity.<sup>6</sup> Artists find themselves backing into other jobs to supply necessary income and acquiring such secondary identities as art teachers, cab drivers, or script coordinators in the production of television advertisements. While these jobs pay the rent, the more substantial they become the more likely it is that they will swallow up the fine arts identity. The more menial jobs leave little time for painting. The artist

resists the erosion of his identity by alternately cultivating the secondary career and then dropping it. Those who become dependent on a higher standard of living than art can provide, who see a two-day-a-week adjunct teaching schedule grow into full time, or who find they can earn \$400 or more a week doing advertising layout, let their primary identity slip away.

As the artist ages, it becomes more difficult to develop a sideline career. Some artists are exceptionally fearful of contaminating their imagination and sensitivity with advertising layout work and book jacket design and so avoid developing these related skills as lucrative sidelines. The high salaries paid for some commercial art work and the ready availability of such work in New York on a freelance basis are viewed as threatening by those artists who feel their vision depends upon their sustaining some occupational marginality. These artists restrict their commitment to fine arts and discover, at the age of fifty, that in order to live they are "pushing" a taxi forty-eight hours a week and painting only on Sundays, and that they have no prospects at all.

Older painters and sculptors who endure in the face of economic discouragement have already received some form of recognition. But because recognition dispensed by the art world is often momentary, casual, and uncoordinated, it does not always bring lasting fame or market demand. But it does nourish hope. Living on unemployment compensation or part-time teaching, supplemented by support from a working spouse, the older artist persists. He works for the day when the critical success of a show five or fifteen years ago may be repeated or surpassed.

### *Older Artists and Career Stress*

The situations of three artists in mid-to-late career who lack full success may illustrate the tenacity of the artistic identity as well as its vulnerability.

*John* is in his mid-thirties and has a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. from a large state university. He came to SoHo from California and paints in a loft on an anonymous commercial backstreet, ignoring the art-world social "scene." He and his wife, a public school teacher, share a spacious loft more than half of which is devoted to his work space and the storage of his finished pieces, raw canvas, and supplies. He teaches three mornings a week at one of the most serious of the city's art schools, one preferred by teachers who desire a minimum of administrative supervision and an adult relationship with their students. During the rest of the week he produces abstract oils and prints. He is a lesser-known painter affiliated



with one of the top galleries, "low man on the totem pole," he says, among twenty-five artists. He is friendly with some of the gallery's better selling new realist and minimalist artists, but he is worried about his place in the art world. While he goes to the mountains on his holidays, he spends the time painting in a closed room.

John and his wife have been living on their teaching pay and on a stipend John has been receiving from his dealer. John has not had a show for three years, and it has been a year since his dealer last sent a client around to his studio. That client was a psychoanalyst who visits New York regularly in an effort to become a serious collector and to mix socially with artists. John thinks the man is bored with his work and buys art as a diversion.

Recently John has had a show scheduled. Both he and his dealer feel that he is ready, and he hopes that with a show impending, the dealer will begin to push the sale of his work. He is at a critical point in his career: if this show is not successful, his dealer will cut his losses and end their relationship. John knows that the gallery is carried by a few internationally known artists and that the system requires him to move up in prominence, or to get out. If he leaves, he will have less time for art as he searches for other income, and he will lose the opportunity to show and sell what he can complete.

He enjoys the stimulation of teaching and the chance to talk with students about issues like the relevance of art to life. He feels making art is worthwhile, particularly when compared to vocations such as that of his father, a salesman, or that of his mother, an accountant. Art, even teaching art, lifts you out of the ordinary day-to-day routine, he explains. But his discussion of the pleasures of working with students suggests an anticipatory resignation to a teaching career.

As happens with many artists who have had only moderate success, John is now at a crossroads. He cannot continue as a full-time painter if he loses his gallery stipend, which provides half his income. Whether he sells or not depends upon the subjective and unpredictable decisions of art buyers. In teaching, on the other hand, he can find the immediate satisfaction of an appreciative student audience and earn a steady and reliable income, but he will have lost the status and potential of an affiliation with a prestigious gallery where he could hope to go to the top.

Jane paints in a large loft studio in a SoHo artists' cooperative building. She bought the studio with her savings and with help from friends, and she has divided it in half, renting space to another artist to help defray her expenses. Jane has an impressive résumé. Several of her large abstracts are in the collections of prominent buyers such as the Rockefeller brothers. Her work hangs on the walls of Chase Manhattan Bank's headquarters and at the Whitney Museum of American Art. An important art magazine featured her work, paintings subtly textured with

stone-color shadings, four years ago. She keeps the article on a shelf next to her kitchen table.

Notwithstanding her past critical success, Jane has never made much money from her art; last year she made "less than a thousand dollars." She subsidizes her annual show at an elite cooperative gallery where sales do not often meet the expenses of the printed brochures. She has to address and mail the brochures herself, but she feels that the cooperative gallery has advantages. "There is no dealer pressure, no one saying, 'This sells, that doesn't; I can use more of these.'" Her income now is from unemployment compensation derived from a clerical job she once held.

Her work is on a large scale, and the walls and floor of her loft are lined with finished and unfinished pieces. There is no room for anyone else to work in the space, nor would she want to have the distraction of other people about. Her one complaint with SoHo is that there is not sufficient anonymity. "I have to say hello to twenty people in the morning when I go for cigarettes." She does not want to meet an audience until she is ready.

Jane fled a Nebraska town of 600 people with "wheat fields that came up to the door." "My father was a mortician, and I used to help him make up the corpses," she said. She studied art in college, moved to New York, and worked as an actor and model. She had rented several other lofts for painting before coming to SoHo. Her social identity is urban, and she could not go back to small-town life. Although she is in her forties, her solid accomplishments still lack the configuration of real career momentum. But the recognition that she has received makes her feel that she can still "make it." She is not ready to quit.

Jane's situation is typical of many artists who discover that they may be in the denouement of a career that has peaked without their having realized it. The hope which drives them struggles against the gravity of age and discouragement. The artist in mid-career must continue to generate excitement among critics and on the market if interest in his or her work is not to go flat. Though such artists commonly complain that dealers curb the artistic freedom of the artist by asking them to repeat marketable work, it is never their own dealers whom they accuse of this pressure. They know that other market arrangements are an inadequate substitute for the dealer, being unlikely to generate the momentum which a career requires in order to "take off."

It is not merely the hope of success and a passion for the artistic experience that lock the older artist into a declining career. The pattern of an established life-style, the mature sense of identity, and the difficulties of starting over also inhibit the marginally successful artist from beginning a new career.

Carlo is a painter-sculptor in his late fifties. In his youth, he was the



top student of an eminent Argentine artist and has received important commissions for murals, mosaics, and sculpture in South America. He came to New York City fifteen years ago seeking a wider market and a less parochial recognition. But he found that his organic, humanistic pieces, which incorporate folklore and biblical imagery, did not find a ready market in the technological and secular culture of the New York art world. He has not sold well here and is presently without an American dealer.

For a time Carlo was given a stipend and rent subsidy by one of New York's most active patrons, an industrialist with an interest in the arts and in artists. But when Carlo's promise of an American career began to fade, the patron suggested that he develop his work in other aesthetic directions. That suggestion ended the relationship in an atmosphere of offended pride and charges of ungratefulness.

Carlo shows and sells through outlets in several South American cities and at international exhibits, but this brings him only a few thousand dollars annually during most years. To meet his expenses, he has to make store display cases and to take on students. If living costs continue to rise and he does not experience a break in his career, he will have to move out of SoHo, perhaps out of New York, to cheaper work space. He has thought of returning to Argentina, where he recently had a show. His sales at the show were few, and he was paid in Argentina's inflated currency, but his return home was an event noted in the daily press there. He could live more cheaply in Argentina and expect some government aid, but he fears the government and disapproves of its repressive treatment of dissidents. Soon, however, he will have to make a decision, and he is an artist, not a politician. In the meantime, he hopes the American market will change in his favor. Despite his age he rejects any suggestion that retirement is a legitimate choice for an artist. He spends his days in his studio and his evenings with old buyers who have become friends, with other South American artists with whom he exchanges help and sympathy, and with his wife whose understanding supports him. "Of course artists do not retire," he says flatly. Nor do they easily abandon art.

These three cases do not, of course, exhaust the possibilities of career dilemmas faced by serious artists whose talents provoke more critical recognition than market support. In an effort to hang onto their beleaguered occupational identity, less successful artists are tempted to transform it into a master identity affecting all their social roles. The nonartist roles are thus inhibited from functioning as points of independent leverage from which the artistic commitment could be criticized and perhaps dislodged.

### *Artist as Master Identity*

Artists who sell little and must therefore subsidize their true vocation with other work usually continue to interpret their occupational choice as a response to a calling. Maintaining the conviction that one is "an artist" as a matter of personal identity is necessary to sustain the producer of art through the prolonged incubation of his career and the erratic nature of the market.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to other occupations, that of the artist does not follow a daily routine interwoven with work routines of others. It lacks explicit directives and rules and regular pay. The role of the fine artist, as opposed to the teaching artist or the commercial artist, lacks institutional underpinning. The struggling artist's personal resolve gains support only from a small informal network of fellow artists, from a friendly collector, perhaps from former teachers or students, and usually from a sympathetic and employed spouse. The production of art is a solitary and self-directed activity, which is why dealers search for artists with personalities strong enough to continue with their work while enduring the neglect of the critics and of the market; talent alone is insufficient for the artistic career.

While successful artists are more secular in their outlook, the yet to be successful tend to mythologize the occupation which gives them an identity but not a living. In order to nourish a commitment to art while working at something else, the artist sees his occupational identity as a mode of consciousness, a way of being in the world, not simply as a type of work. As a cab driver or newspaper illustrator, he can remain a fine artist by saving his pay to buy the time to paint. The elusive recognition of the art world becomes less important than personal commitment in defining one's status as an artist. As one artist whose work in photography began after she arrived in SoHo as the wife of a painter explained,

It was a deliberate decision to call myself an artist. It meant a commitment to me. It means to me anyone who has this commitment—to any occupation. It means being into how a thing is done, enjoying it, self-discovery. The more official definitions of "artist" were motivated by the big egos here [in SoHo]. But some who do art are not artists. They're not really involved in it. It means a degree of exploration, of progress. You don't need to meet with any great critical acceptance.

But if some artists use a standard of personal growth to sustain them while they wait for critical recognition, others use the artistic identity to explain and cope with personal difficulties. "It is the artistic life itself that is conducive to emotional instability," maintained one conceptual



artist. "Right now, I am in the process of going crazy. It's because you have to be open and exposed a whole lot as an artist. I have two kids from my first marriage, and now my second marriage is falling apart. As an artist I've made strong emotional demands upon my wife." The very sensitivity which he sees as essential to him as an artist is blamed as the source of his trouble. From this point of view, the existence of emotional pain and the collapse of human relationships can be turned into a certification of artistic identity. This artist, like many with steady and demanding financial responsibilities eating into their commitment to art, copes with the pressures by defining them as part of the condition of being an artist. Since he feels that his whole existence is as an artist, he cannot live with any other occupation. And so he cannot solve his problems. "When my kids ask me if it is worth it, I tell them I'm compelled to do art."

The least productive assertion of the artistic identity is the claim to be exempt from other responsibilities. Where a dealer might help to dry out an alcoholic artist who is selling, and members of a SoHo artist cooperative have "carried" an unhelpful but artistically prestigious fellow member, the artist who is a failure has a narrower base of support, usually consisting of an employed spouse or lover. These, however, eventually tire of supporting the role of artist in a roommate when it means fulfilling all other roles necessary to the relationship themselves.

One artist responded to a career slump and a state of depression by staying in bed all day for months at a time, reading science fiction. At night he drank. He refused to perform any household drudgery on the grounds that, after all, he was an artist. His wife eventually left him, and without her support he gave up his fine-art identity. She reported that after a few years he had become highly successful in an advertising firm. The dramatization of the "ignored artist" role requires, paradoxically, that one not be truly ignored. Once deprived of any audience, individuals usually soon give it up.

### *Marginality, Alienation, and Exile*

The artistic identity elicits opposition from American society. As one SoHo painter and full-time college art teacher put it,

The decision to become an artist in the United States, not in Europe, is seen as useless, effeminate. Male art majors get a lot of flack from their parents, I've noticed as an art teacher. Most art majors drop out of art. . . . It is hard to be monetarily unsuccessful in this society. And also, art is a lonely occupation. The rewards are often in the work itself, and the products may never be seen except by other artists. It is the last psychological and intellectual frontier.

Such an artist can turn the indifference of the world into a prophetic affirmation of self. He is tempted to see himself as one striving to hold open a door through which a glimpse of a different reality is possible, and who finds nobody looking. It is the routinized nature of society that the artist blames. "Reality sets in; people don't care about innovation. They don't know how to read a painting. When they ask me, 'What does it mean?' they want dramatic not plastic content. . . . You don't have to suffer to make art, but you do have to be on the outside to look in."

The artistic consciousness is perceived as a condition of being out of phase with the world, and some less than successful artists cling to this condition as an assurance of their artistic authenticity. Erik, an abstract expressionist painter in his forties, illustrates this characteristic. He has been a serious student of painting since his childhood, first exhibiting and selling at age sixteen. But his style is not in vogue now as a developing tradition, and solid recognition has eluded him. He, in turn, feels the SoHo market is over promoted and faddish, too full of painters afraid to take the risks of real innovation. Styles like the popular new realism, he feels, collapse culture into the depthless present of an amateur snapshot.

Erik works as a carpenter building advertising sets and doing loft renovation for, among other clients, successful SoHo artists. He stops work one month out of three to paint on his accumulated savings. A former loft dweller, he sees SoHo as having become compromised by bourgeois culture, and he now prefers three tenement rooms in a burned-out section of the lower east side of Manhattan, a short walk from SoHo. In economic, cultural, and geographic terms, he and others like him are captured satellites of SoHo, in stabilized antagonism and attraction. The rent Erik pays is one third of that common in SoHo, but with ten robberies in the last six years, his housing is not really inexpensive. He says he stays where he is for the view. A look out the windows reveals tots climbing in and out of the cellars of demolished tenements and unboarded derelict buildings. The sun glints off broken glass and auto chrome strewn around the empty lots. The shops, all Spanish, ungated and open for only a few hours during daylight. "This is not America. It is the edge of the world. That's why I like it down here," he says.

He came to New York City and the area near SoHo because it is the center of the art world, the best location in which to study and find a market. He lives where he does because it seems not to be claimed by any world at all. SoHo proper preserved the symbolic marginality of artists and poets in the 1950s and 1960s, before legalization of the artists' residency escalated real-estate values and brought both the art market and such amenities as take-out French paté into the neighborhood. For many artists living away from the strip of art galleries along West Broadway, SoHo continues to provide a needed peripheral milieu.



Artists strive to protect their creativity from the formula traps that accumulate in their medium and from the regulations which pervade society in general. And because their artist identity is basic to their sense of self and is not limited to their occupational behavior, they may also exaggerate their conflicts of interest with institutional society.<sup>8</sup> In the years after SoHo was rezoned to permit artist residency, many artists remained philosophically opposed to, and in practice unwilling to cooperate with, political canvassers, the artist certification committee which was set up as residential gatekeeper, and with the organizational requirements of community action. They felt nostalgia for the days when the bureaucracies were kept away from the creative process and artists lived illegally with commercial leases, with beds and stoves hidden in the work debris around their lofts. Some continue to leave their doorbells in disrepair as they did in the days when they routinely ignored all daytime knocks to avoid city inspectors and meter readers. Sensing that lawyers and "burghers" playing real-estate games may be the ultimate beneficiaries of SoHo's residential regulations, some artists feel cynically justified in fabricating painting credentials for their nonartist friends and for buyers of their co-op loft spaces. They cannot believe that government regulation can serve the creative process.

Artists without obvious success feel that their creativity requires them to maintain at least a symbolic marginality, if not precariousness, in their lives. The easy references some of these artists make to suicide plans, to doubts of their own sanity, to the manic-depressive emotional cycle to which they say their creativity is tied, and the acute adolescent self-consciousness to which they refer appear in everyday conversation as incantations of marginality. Such self-description seems to enhance the existential vertigo which they feel is necessary to hold their creative edge. The family and personal lives of the successful artists, by contrast, are stable retreats from the public world that verifies their identities as artists. Successful artists may acknowledge the tensions and strains of their occupation, but they do not parade an existential precariousness or instability as evidence of their creativity.

In their flights to avoid social integration as nonartists, the least successful artists see themselves as pilgrims, traveling light. They attach themselves to a theme of exile that was popular with an earlier generation of American artists.<sup>9</sup> One such painter said,

I went to Greece essentially for a supportive audience. Not an audience supportive of my particular paintings, but supportive of the quest of the painter. Those people were responsive to the adventure of trying to become an artist—or a monk or a fanatic, for that matter. And they would be the material, in a way, not really the audience. They were open to the heroic adventure of becoming an artist, the ethical decision that a sage, a fanatic, an artist must make.

This decision entails independence from the standards of society and thus secures an escape from the taken-for-granted nature of conventional perception. It is not especially fashionable in the art world to carry this decision to bohemian extremes, however, since such extremes in dress, sexual practice, and use of intoxicants no longer distinguishes the artist from the excesses of much of bourgeois society. This has been true in New York since the 1930s, when the urban middle class began to assimilate the outward signs of unconventionality that had previously had a protest value.<sup>10</sup>

Successful SoHo artists tend to view flagrant bohemianism as evidence of a superficial artistic talent and commitment. But even for those who enjoy the rewards of recognition, the sense of social marginality persists and calls for some form of expression. Many successful artists, sure of their place in the art world, have moved out of SoHo to nonurban surroundings. The pastoral fringes of New England are popular, as were the Connecticut farms for Malcolm Cowley's artists during the thirties. Parts of Vermont remain socially closer to SoHo than does Brooklyn. The successful artist can live among horse- and crop-talking farmers and still be within a day's drive of his SoHo dealer, the art market gossip, and his artist friends. Moderately successful artists remain tied to the city by their own and their spouse's jobs and cannot so easily make a symbolic departure from bourgeois society. The least successful artists are the most emancipated and the most in need of symbolic reinforcement of their artist identities.

### *Myth and Reconciliation with Society*

The artists who find access to the market difficult tend to mythologize their alienation more than do successful artists. They see the artist as one who stimulates the cultural bloodstream of society, preventing its descent into triviality, decay, and death. "Self-expression is not art," explained one painter. "Art has to hit a truth discernable to some part of humanity. Perhaps only to yourself as a part of humanity, at first. The vanguard hits home to a few, but this reverberates throughout all society eventually. Without art, things would not change. It is messianic. . . . My purpose here is to enlarge meaning."

The myth of the messianic artist has a powerful hold on the artist whose work fails the commercial test. It provides a nonrevolutionary, indeed a nonpolitical, way toward eventual reconciliation between the creative self and institutional society. It defuses some of the tension between the dominant commercial and functionalist culture and the subculture of artistic response. In the myth, the bourgeoisie is pictured as preoccupied with preserving itself within the exiting social structure,



which becomes its tomb. The artist, with the covert sympathy of this same bourgeoisie, alters and renews routinized social visions. In this way, the world is saved by its own artistic outcasts. "As an artist, you have a special relation to the objects you make; they subvert the world," said a collagist whose work has yet to find a market. "Art should be dangerous. But at some level our society is willing to be subverted by the artist, who changes what is, creating new forms." The notion of the artist as the savior of existing society by his power to transform it provides the possibility of a reconciliation between the artist and society and between the artist and the parents from whom he had to break away to realize his calling.

### *The Protest of Secular Artists*

According to the messianic view of the relationship between art and society, the fine arts serve a purpose superior to that of the decorative arts or the functional crafts.

Craftspeople in SoHo feel that their social role and their products are disparaged by the artist-savior myth propagated by unsuccessful artists. It denies them the higher prestige which rewards the producer of nonutilitarian works. Many craftspeople attack the mystique of the fine artist by saying that it disguises and promotes a parasitical relationship of artists to society and to conventionally productive people. "They think that if you're born with one talent," said a weaver, "you can't have another, such as economic ability. It just helps them feel superior to the person they end up leaning on. It's a total myth to think that to produce crap which happens to sell limits your creative spark. It's a cop-out and an excuse."

Craftspeople are unwilling to concede that the magic of artistic "creativity" is a monopoly of the fine artist. They struggle against their own functionalist tradition in order to raise the definition of their work to the status of being "museum worthy" and collectible as art. Their furniture and textiles are losing their identity as useful objects and are becoming wood and fabric sculpture, some even flaunting a decadent dysfunctionality. SoHo craftspeople, intent on bridging the gap between craft and fine art, are making craft-like objects with art materials and art objects with craft materials. Either way, they reject the prosaic definition of craft as the creation of objects by hand which, while beautiful, are somehow in their essence serviceable. Status-enhancing craft journals support this trend toward making the products of woodworking, pottery, weaving, and smithing into collectible art.<sup>11</sup> Several SoHo galleries feature such work, and dealers report that buyers are often more comfortable evaluating evident craftsmanship than obscure conceptual state-

ments motivating some of the avant-garde fine art. The craft strategy in SoHo is to free such craftsmanship from the assumption of utility, letting the craft object float more freely in the market.

### *The Religion of Art*

The occupational commitment which supplies the master identity of aspiring fine artists functions also as a substitute religious conviction. It seeks to resolve questions of ultimate meaning with a doctrine of individual creativity. According to this conviction, after a period of self-discipline and practice, the creative experience occurs as a moment of harmony between the individual and a deeper reality.

According to some artists, making art resolves conflicts between the cognitive and the emotional sides of the personality, allaying their fears of personal disintegration. One described this function as a ritualized part of his painting technique.

You have to struggle against fixations [upon abstract ideas] to get back to sensuous impulses. So I like to use brushes rather than rollers or spray. They are slower and give me more control. I buy the pigments and mix them with the vehicles, though all the colors I use are available premixed. The labor process helps me to think through the use of the color. Do I want to use it or not? I deliberate sensuously. I can't go any faster than the hand can illustrate the sensuous idea.<sup>12</sup>

The manual aspect of the arts and the possibility of a dialogue between painter and canvas appear to artists as a creative advantage when compared with the blank page faced by the writer. The unblocked creative process signifies the moment of cohesion when the artist feels most completely an integrated self. Libidinal pressures seem under control, made into usable material rather than suffered as compulsions. Social pressures are surmounted. Intellectual bewilderment seems resolved. In the studio it is possible for the artist to realize moments of liberation, a diffused eroticism, and a potency which is absent from his other relationships with the world. These moments of creative control constitute an ecstatic experience which can sustain the artist who is without market success.

The power of the creative experience was described by one painter as follows:

There is a part of the self I abandon myself to, the gutsy, sensual part. But on the other side is the intellectual, the critical. All painters must switch back and forth between the two. . . . I think all kids have this animalistic inside, this subconscious. They have good color and



plastic sense. When they have to face life, the feeling for the plastic disappears. Artists have to struggle with this, to nurture the beast within themselves while they refine their intellect. Ryder is an example—he couldn't verbalize very well, but he was powerfully expressionistic. Some artists go insane quickly from this strain. They go too far in one direction.

The creative moment is one of mastery over both oneself and the world. It can hold at bay the perceptions which haunt existence in a secular civilization, perceptions that life has no higher purpose, that existence is absurd and arbitrary. When the structure of mundane routine cracks during sleepless nights, the artist can cling to the rock of his commitment to art. As one painter put it,

Art changes reality for everybody else, and so it is a way of dealing with the awe and terror I feel about creation. That anything exists at all fills me with awe. . . . As an artist I can order the world in a way that in a family or on the job, I can't. It doesn't do the same thing for me. My art allows me to explain creation in a way that takes anxiety away from being alive. Why am I here at all?

The artist is a remaker of the world. The SoHo community presumes that an artist's desire to mold public reality has *prima facie* legitimacy, although in specific cases the community has had a difficult time trying to distinguish the aesthetic value of an outdoor mural or street performance from self-advertising. Changing the public's perception of space, form, and color, the artist feels like a cocreator of reality. This is one reason artists have the self-confidence to place their statues in apartment malls and public parks, even when their works provoke public opposition.

SoHo artists do not describe themselves as members of religious organizations. While over a dozen cooperative experiments in early childhood education have been set up by SoHo parents to meet the needs of their children, no religious services have been organized. When residents venture into adjacent Catholic parochial schools and community centers, it is usually to wait uncomfortably in line to vote on election days or to transform convenient but underutilized church spaces into daycare centers. Yet even while rejecting conventional religious answers, SoHo artists remain aware of the religious questions. Though they may think of these questions of ultimate meaning in psychiatric or philosophical terms, their artistic commitment is one of their ways of answering them.

### *Conclusion*

All stages of the fine art career are profoundly affected by the conditions of the American market, which determine that most artists must survive for long periods on anticipation while subsidizing their art with other jobs. Even after suffering through a long "apprenticeship," they may never realize financial or critical success as artists.

When beginning his career, the aspiring artist is nourished by a home and community which orient their children to an awareness of the humanistic tradition; personal autonomy is valued, education in personal awareness and expressive skills is expected, and occupation itself is seen to some extent as a personal voyage of service to others and discovery of self. The humanistic tradition drawn on by the parents of SoHo artists portrays the choice of career as a response to a "calling" from the collective nature of reality, an appeal that is echoed in the inner self. However secularized this conversation with that reality has become in the modern world, it is a dialogue which supports the individual in contradicting mundane convention in the interest of conformity to a more elevated reality.

The humanistic perspective on career is strongest in those families where the parents' occupations give them some justification to claim autonomy, service, and identification of self with occupation. At the same time, however, this perspective is distinctly subordinate, even within the professional level of the middle class. The dominant outlook is materialistic, pragmatic, and mundane. Consequently, the aspiring artist articulates his or her ambitions in the middle-class milieu without being able to make them a rationally defensible choice.

The choice of an art career in this culturally complex context becomes interpreted as a necessary development of the self for which early artistic precociousness is taken as evidence. Lack of affiliation with youthful peer groups, adolescent self-consciousness, and feelings of being socially displaced find a resolution in the commitment to art.

The second stage in the artistic career, following motivation, involves an outward identification of the self with art, a declaration to the family and society that art has become the essential identity and the only means of achieving full personal realization. This declaration, usually made as a decision to study art at the expense of more practical courses of education, is escalated into a rebellion by parents who withdraw their psychological and material support. This rebellion is not forthright because it is not a clean rejection of middle-class traditions or a complete reversal of the priorities accepted by the middle class itself. The rebellion involves an educational commitment to art without a rejection of economic achievement, and includes the assumption of the self-image of artist as a "master identity." As a quasi-sacred identity, the self-image



of artist is not usually paraded in public but awaits the external recognition which will allow the aspirant to say, "Yes, I am an artist."

The third career stage lasts from the end of formal education until recognition has been achieved, the career has been abandoned, or the artist dies. In this stage, the successful artist separates himself from the unsuccessful. The problem of this period is maintaining a career in the face of neglect by society. Those who persist through a protracted "incubation period" do so on a staple of hope mixed with moments of minor and uncoordinated recognition—a grant, a sale, a show. The successful artist is the one who is able eventually to consolidate these moments of random recognition into career momentum.

Artists in this middle period must avoid a careerist involvement in a competing nonart occupation if they are to persist. They must act as their own patrons, and having to justify this, they maintain a commitment to the ideological uniqueness of art in relation to all other occupations. The successful artist is released from this necessity; the art world confirms his identity and its market calls forth a practical and realistic series of responses to career questions, not ideological fireworks. The enduring but unsuccessful artist, avoiding a realistic confrontation with the dilemma of art versus economic success, is the main proponent of the artistic mystique. He may even come to see art and the artist in near-religious terms; the artist becomes an outcast and marginal figure who will eventually return to redeem the mundane world from its own decline into routine and from its lack of perceptiveness. The creative endeavor becomes, then, crucial to social invigoration and to the survival of mankind in truly human terms.

The perception of the artist as set apart in a cultural, rather than simply in an economic, sense is used to excuse, even ennoble, the unsuccessful artist's departure from middle-class occupational expectations. For him, social and particularly market marginality can become a confirmation of occupational purity. When success does not confirm the artistic identity, failure may be drafted to the same service.

# 5

## The Successful Artist in the SoHo Market

### *The Artist-Dealer Relationship: The Path to Success*

From among the hundreds of fine-arts graduates and self-trained artists who pour into SoHo each summer—most of whom leave during the succeeding winters—only a few are able to catch hold of the market. They comprise an elite among the three to four thousand artists working in the community and have achieved recognition and economic success through their affiliation with a prestigious dealer in whose gallery they periodically show and in whose judgment his customers have confidence.

The dealer is expected to be an aesthetic counselor, a trustworthy business manager, and an emotional shock absorber. It is the rare individual who can play all these roles for the artist. At the minimum, however, the successful artist demands a tough sales representative, and it is only since the 1960s that artists have been in any position to make such a demand. Up to that time, the sales potential of living artists was considerably less than it has since become, and artists had no choice but to tolerate a sometimes despotic dealer paternalism. Even today, some long-established dealers affect an aristocratic disdain for commercial details when it comes to getting out a statement or a check promptly after the sale of an artist's work. Other dealers lack the capital to advance payments to the artist until the client pays the bill. Since some of the biggest clients also have a cavalier attitude toward the art transaction and may delay payment for six months or a year, the artist may find



himself waiting for his money from a dealer who is reluctant to press the buyer. Such artists feel that they are having their noses rubbed in the market, and by switching galleries when they are displeased with a dealer's performance, the more successful among them are able to do something about it.

Successful artists seek a gallery that will advertise their work aggressively and lend it as much prestige as possible. They may find, however, that they sell better in a moderately well-known gallery than in one that is already topheavy with the biggest names. One SoHo artist, despite the critical success he had gained with his Fifty-seventh Street dealer, found that through gallery advances over the years he had accumulated a \$13,000 debt which he was unable to pay because the sales of his work were insufficient. His dealer ran one of the most highly respected galleries in the art world but remained emotionally committed to the artists who had been with him the longest and through whom his gallery had achieved its fame. Consequently, he neglected his newer artists. The painter switched to a young SoHo dealer who applied to the marketing of art the salesmanship he had perfected in the printing business. "My debt is now down to two or three thousand, after a year and a half," said the artist. "This guy may be considered crude and a pusher, but he does sell your paintings."

Each artist wants the dealer's customers steered to his own work. The success of one artist may be interpreted by the other artists in the same gallery as neglect of their own talents. Switching galleries often alleviates jealousy among artists and, if handled correctly, can speed up the process of recognition. It gives an artist a measure of control in the art market and allows him to exploit opportunities to develop his career.

The successful artist relies upon a relationship of confidence with a competent dealer in order to exploit his opportunities for career development. David, an artist in his mid-thirties, is a good example of how such artists operate.

David was born and grew up in a middle class section of Brooklyn. He traveled the same social distance, from a family-based neighborhood to cosmopolitan Manhattan, as do most artists who arrive in SoHo from the West, Midwest, or abroad. After high school, he entered a well-regarded college of art and engineering as a student of architecture. When the art and architecture curricula divided after the freshman year, he said, "I discovered the only thing I was interested in designing was my own studio." David switched to fine arts. He hoped to further his childhood interest in painting and still be able to satisfy his parents' desire to see their son in a profession. Always an "A" student, he graduated at the top of his class. He commuted throughout his college years, living at home and avoiding the bohemian life. He pursued his career with the same deliberate concentration that his childhood friends employed in going on to study medicine or law.

At the time of his graduation, David suddenly realized that while he was a success as an art student, he had no immediate way to make a living. He therefore took an intensive summer course in art education and became license to teach art in the city school system. He taught for four years and designed book jackets until gradually his fine-arts career began to support him. While his incubation as an unknown artist was uncharacteristically short, he remains an economic realist.

The reality of being an artist is, for most, pretty grim. First you think, "Once I have my first successful show, I'll have it made," That's not so. I had a very successful show, sold fairly well, and got placed in a few museums and collections. But still I seemed to stagnate. One good show doesn't mean at all that everything else you do will sell. I presume that had I gone to graduate school I would have known more about the art market. Art students can know who you are, but still, nothing really happens to you.

David was being handled by his first dealer at this point, a man he characterized as "drunk, lecherous, and obnoxious." When the opportunity arose, he switched to a more conscientious dealer who was also more ideologically sensitive to clients. This dealer was a former staff worker in an uptown gallery who had established her own growing business in SoHo. He selected her on the basis of his own impressions and the advice of a top SoHo dealer who, while helpful to young artists like David, was not yet willing to commit himself to them. David has worked out a flexible arrangement with his new dealer. Little is stipulated in writing. She handles his market affairs, including his shows in Europe and in other American cities. She collects a 40 percent commission on sales of his work from her SoHo gallery and 10 percent on sales through her network of connections to other galleries. David shows only when he is ready and takes no stipends to even out the good seasons and the bad. He regularizes his income with the help of his wife, a free-lance journalist, who does much of her work at home and is in charge of the family finances.

David has had a dozen shows in major European and American cities, all arranged by his SoHo dealer. His only complaint is that his best shows have occurred out of town. Given the focus of publicity on New York in the art world, this is a handicap. "If it doesn't happen in New York, it doesn't happen," he laments. Shows that are not widely reviewed and paintings that disappear into the hands of obscure buyers add little, he feels, to the momentum of an art career. As he becomes better known, however, more of his exhibitions are being mounted in New York.

The realism with which he approaches the market and the emotion which leads him to paint are not always easily reconciled. He feels that if he were to pay more systematic attention to his career, he might paint



less. An output of fewer but better paintings would benefit both his income and his reputation. The fact that he likes to paint causes him to produce too many pictures. He's done well over 150 major paintings since college—eggs, fruit, flowers, landscapes, figures. All are large and intricately executed in a realistic mode. His versatility worries him as much as his prolificacy. It obscures the recognizability of his work. "If you see a piece in a show and can't recognize it, that's me," he laughs. However, he acknowledges that he has benefited from painting in the marketable style of sharp-focus or photo realism. Private buyers and museum curators who are seriously interested in representing this style are obliged to include David's work in their collections.

David discusses the upward movement of the prices of his work, the vital signs of his professional health, with the objectivity of a surgeon reading an electrocardiograph. Through his most recent sales in Europe he established a price range of \$8,000 to \$10,000, 20 percent more than his previous prices. He anticipates that, as the dollar value of his work increases, his dealer will agree to lower her commission rate to one-third.

Very good years for the sale of his work have been followed by years when nothing seemed to sell. He blames the periodic slumps in the economy and their effect on the art market. "No one sold anything in 1975." In slow periods, however, the art market reinforces the careers of artists who have already proved successful. David's dealer's contacts helped him. He coped with the decline in the market for major paintings by turning to work that could be sold as prints and by obtaining Bicentennial commissions from the Department of the Interior and from major oil corporations. "When people know you, you just get these jobs," he explained.

### *Creativity and Commerce*

The guiding aesthetic concern among successful painters, whether minimalists, conceptualists, or realists, and indeed the central value for the entire modernist period of art, is the demand for originality. According to Poggioli: "Classical art, through the method of imitation and the practice of repetition, tends toward the ideal of renewing, in the sense of integration and perfection. But for modern art in general, and for avant-garde in particular, the only irremediable and absolute aesthetic error is a traditional artistic creation, an art that imitates and repeats itself."<sup>1</sup> Originality, more than a singular mastery of craftsmanship, keeps the successful artist ahead of the field of imitators. Indeed, conceptualization can be a sufficient aesthetic justification, as when a SoHo sculptor creates blueprints for work later executed by metal

workers and carpenters. Technological innovations have so facilitated copying that the ability to accurately reproduce an image from the world or from a conception no longer serves to distinguish one student from another. Significant art begins with a new perspective that permits the reappropriation of exhausted and banal subjects. For example, the construction of paintings employing the point of view of the camera lens—the photo-realist technique popular in SoHo—reclaims familiar imagery through a shift to the camera's perspective and selectivity. The artist, Poggioli argues, must continually seek new ways to "deform" the existing imagery.

The deformation is determined by a stylistic drive, which inaugurates a new order as it denies the ancient order. The motivation for this denial is very simple: modern civilization has achieved a representational technique so perfect that the artist can easily become a pedagogical monstrosity, that is to say, a disciple more virtuoso than his own teachers. The extensiveness of the artist's information and the efficacy of devices could easily put the modern artist in a position to acquire, if he wants it, a mimetic handiness that artists in other times have attained only thanks to long apprenticeship, by means of hard, day-in-day-out exertion.<sup>2</sup>

The modernist mandate to surpass mere technical virtuosity becomes the burden of having to sustain an independent vision. Perhaps this is an impossible burden. In any case, it has brought some SoHo painters, even some of the most successful, to the point of creative exhaustion. Unable to constantly come up with fresh ideas, such painters believe they develop creative blocks, which they may treat by therapeutically repainting old themes. Such work can prove financially rewarding for the artist who caters to an unsophisticated audience. New buyers of art, especially those who seek to enhance their status through art may be unable to detect stereotypical imagery, uninspired craftsmanship, or trivial innovation. Among artists themselves, however, the producers of such art are shrugged off as unworthy of serious attention, and painters who confuse repetition and voluminous output with genuine career progress pay in prestige.

Artists are concerned to distinguish between creativity and copying and to discredit those who meet the demand for innovation by plagiarizing the work of others. When, for example, a California artist who had been painting in the photo-realist style began to acquire a significant reputation by imitating the innovations of more successful SoHo painters, he was vilified in SoHo artist circles with the name "Double Cross" and denounced in letters to art journals. Artists are keenly interested in setting the record straight as to which artist originated which idea. Successful artists feel they must guard against lesser artists stealing their



ideas because critics, left to themselves, cannot be relied upon to distinguish original work from warmed over, eclectic copies. The nonspecific influence of one artist upon another, an inevitable occurrence, is permissible when it is deferentially acknowledged. But artists, concerned as they are with the trademarks of personal styles, prefer to link themselves openly only with the deceased. In so doing, they are able to place themselves in the forward motion of art history, while avoiding living competition.

The successful artist does not confuse sales and income with genuine reputation, nor would other artists let him. Stories of mediocre artists who have become commercial successes are a staple in the SoHo art community and circulate as cautionary tales. Gossip both activates the artist community and acts as a social control. In the retelling, the vulgar success is ridiculed and stripped of any artistic pretensions. One artist, describing another, said,

[He] has what we call a painting factory. He has a Chinese houseboy and he paints in a Dior jumpsuit. He has assistants to size—really, to *paint* the canvases, to tell the truth. He is going great guns. At a recent show in Washington, he had something like 600 tulips, 500 anemonies, 700 of something else. This is terrible. . . . He's very topical, too. At the space shot period he came out with his moons and things within a few days. I call it the "New York School of Wallpaper Painting."

According to this artist, many of the new realists have wandered over the frontier and out of creative territory. "The new realists are 'The New York School of Billboard Painting.' I sound jealous, but really, my own career is doing very well." Painters watch each other with whistles in their mouths, ready to blow "foul" when an "uncreative" painter gains a market advantage.

Investor influence on the higher levels of the market may tempt the successful artist into a casual attitude toward creativity. A collector, taken with the treatment of a particular subject, may ask the artist for another painting along the same, proven lines. The artist may comply, maintaining that he has cast the used theme in a fresh perspective. But other artists will insist that they see little that is new in the piece. A dealer often finds that his artists are linked in the minds of collectors with particular subjects, and when these sell well, the dealers try to persuade the artist to continue executing the familiar theme. This is the dealer pressure that artists in cooperative galleries congratulate themselves on having avoided. Some artists compromise with this pressure by doing a series of pictures on one subject, developing it completely, and then abandoning it. The relationship between artist and dealer

reaches its most subtle plane as the dealer tries to draw out more works on a popular theme without openly contradicting the artist's ideological commitment to originality.

### *Role Exaggeration and Situational Trust*

An allocation of roles may take place between the successful artist and his dealer in a way that allows each to exaggerate the importance of his own function. The successful artist becomes exclusively an artist, disdainful of all commercial considerations, while the dealer claims a scientific knowledge of the market that he does not have. The empathy required in the relationship between dealer and artist can erode as their roles become more mutually exclusive. The artist especially may become increasingly unwilling to share the credit for his success with the dealer.

Dealers sometimes spectacularly fail to live up to their claims of professionalism and cannot deliver the market they promise to their most successful artists. For example, in 1976 a showing of the works of a New York painter, widely known for his recycling of the imagery of mass culture as fine art, was arranged in Tehran. The Persian audience was not only oil-rich but was known to have identified in the past with avant-garde American artistic and cultural commodities. When the show opened it shocked the Tehran art world; it was composed of paintings of cats and dogs. Nothing was sold. The artist's agent had not scouted the market sufficiently and did not realize that dogs and cats are considered to be ritually unclean in Iran; neither they nor their likenesses are tolerated in the proper Persian household. Artists entertain themselves with stories of such dealer blunders in order to minimize the dealer's role and humble his posture.

Beyond having to answer for his own mistakes, the dealer often has to absorb or deflect the resentment which the successful artist feels entitled to express toward the art market and its infringement upon aesthetic freedom. The art world as a subculture gives the highest prestige to originality, which it understands to be the product of creative autonomy. Artists themselves protect this perspective by cultivating a suspicion of commercial success. Artists of all degrees of economic success share this suspicion as a basis for occupation-wide fraternalism. Although, like the belief in the sourness of grapes out of reach, hostility to the market is more noticeably the rightful consolation of the unsuccessful artist, anti-commercial grouching serves the purposes of the successful artist as well. Hostility toward the market and the dealer reassures the successful artist that he has not compromised his aesthetic standards or "sold out" to get



where he is. As one successful SoHo artist said, "I don't want to owe anyone. I won't take advances or stipends [from my dealer]. Dealers give you nothing for nothing. And if I fail, I have the consolation which only artists have of becoming really important after I'm dead."

The ideological conviction that the autonomous individual is the creative force in society entitles the successful artist to claim protection against that society, especially its political and commercial concerns, on higher moral grounds. "Political purposes mean the death of art," a successful photo-realist painter said. "A few could do it, like in *Guernica*, but most can't. I am into beauty. I feel I'm making a statement about landscape details that are ignored by necessity in everyday viewing. I don't feel that I'm celebrating commodity culture, though I know that some people say so. I don't consciously search out objects for their machine-cult value, even if I do end up painting planes, motorcycles, and car engines." "As a professional artist, I paint for art history," said another successful SoHo artist. "Anything less is simply masturbation."

The claims of society upon the autonomy of the artist take their most immediate form in market pressures transferred through the dealer. As a result, both individual dealers and dealers as a group find themselves the object of resentment by successful artists. Nevertheless, in order to reduce economic and ideological stress, successful artists must express confidence in their dealers. One's own dealer is treated as the trustworthy exception in a market toward which they remain wary. Having risen toward success through the layers of the art market, these artists either have personally experienced dishonest dealers or have had to show solidarity with those artists who have. Artists feel victimized by the market, but their moral indignation is qualified by prudence. They are fully aware that their own isolated market role commands little power. One successful artist observed:

Dealers don't like to socialize with artists. It makes them nervous. They are aware that they have made a big killing at one time on the artist's work and will do so again on his future work. Dealers would rather get together with each other to show off their collections. Things of mine that I sold for \$1,000 have gone up to \$15,000. That's an increase of fifteen times! The dealers and the collectors get it. I'm not happy, but I'm getting used to it.

The top dealers buy and speculate in the works of their artists. They explain that such investments strengthen the artist's belief that, as dealers, they are doing all they can to increase the value of his work. Artists are aware, if not effusively appreciative, of this dealer function. "Dealers will collaborate at an auction to keep the price of a painter's work high so that their own collections of that painter do not depreciate," said

one painter. "So even if photo realism became unfashionable in a year, I'm well enough established to be protected." The successful artist benefits from this commercial manipulation, yet withholds his moral approval. The very success of such efforts can be construed by an unhappy artist as evidence of his exploitation.

Commenting upon the market in general or upon their past dealers, successful artists characterize the trust relationship between artist and dealer as deliberately encouraged by the dealer for his own advantage. The artists feel that, while their access to the market is clearly limited when they pledge to sell only through one dealer, the dealer tries to avoid making his commitments to the artist concrete. "When I first came [to SoHo], I talked initially to [a top dealer] who didn't pick me up," explained one artist. "He seemed helpful and encouraging, but that was all. Later, he was furious when I began to sell and was with someone else. [He] wanted to let me develop without his taking any risk, but without losing me either, you see. I went with someone who would pay me a stipend."

Expressing confidence in the abilities of his present dealer, another artist displayed the characteristic attitude of artists toward dealers other than their own: "Dealers are more dishonest than any other businessmen because artists are so vulnerable. Not a day goes by that a dealer does not swindle an artist." This artist was not surprised when he heard the news of the Marlborough Gallery conspiracy which was revealed in 1975 during the trial of the decade in the art world. "It's only the tip of the iceberg, just a bigger example of what happens every day," he commented.

The head of the international Marlborough Galleries, Frank Lloyd, was the agent for his longtime friend, the painter Mark Rothko. Before Rothko committed suicide, leaving two minor children, he named Lloyd a trustee for his estate, which included hundreds of unsold works. Lloyd was convicted of conspiring with other trustees to purchase for his gallery over eight hundred of the estate's paintings in order to resell them at six to ten times the purchase price. The gallery would have realized an illicit profit of more than \$5 million on the Rothko children's property, which it had arranged to have underappraised through collusion with another gallery.<sup>3</sup>

The abuse of trust exemplified by the Marlborough Gallery case demonstrates that the dealer enjoys a great freedom to maneuver in the performance of his role. Because of his obligations to present the work of each of his fifteen to twenty artists to society effectively, the dealer must remain free of the control of any one artist. Each artist wants his show at the height of the art season; each wants to be treated as a crucial member of a most important movement. The dealer needs and gets a great deal of latitude in order to balance their conflicting demands.



On the other hand, the dealer's relationship with his buyers is equally demanding and essential to the successful transaction. The artist knows that his dealer will not automatically steer each collector to his work. He cannot contractually require that the dealer attend to the artist's interests at the expense of the collector's. The more innovative and aggressive the dealer, the more freedom he requires to adjust these short-run conflicts of interest.

The selling of art is itself an art, an art of juggling a multiplicity of interests and of anticipating responses. The dealer's position at the center of the art transaction requires the assumption by buyer and seller that the dealer's knowledge and fairness will resolve the obvious conflicts, and that the long-term interests of dealer, collector, and artist coincide. The fact that dealers can accumulate personal holdings of their artists' works, in which they then speculate, shows that the art market is a web of trust based upon mutual liability. It is less professionalized than the stock exchange, where, by contrast, the Securities and Exchange Commission forbids the broker to speculate in the stocks he recommends to clients on the grounds that it would constitute a conflict of interest.

Artists have to trust their dealers as a requirement of market participation. Their relationship with their dealers is personal as well as financial. Because it operates in the realm of economic uncertainty, it seeks refuge in the realm of personal obligation. Many of the particulars of the dealer's services cannot be contractually delimited. Nor can the artist's resolve to continue to produce saleable work. The mutual and extralegal dependence of the artist and dealer finds expression in the language of moral obligation. As a show of reciprocal trust, the financial contract itself is often a verbal one and is hostage to the continued assumption of goodwill by both parties.

This assumption is a *situational* trust whose moral corollaries the artist as well as the dealer tries to exploit. Artists count on the dealer's sense of responsibility to compensate for their generic market weakness. The successful artist is tempted to prove to himself that his relationship with his dealer is one of friendship and concern by asking the dealer to cope with his personal problems. Various artists have, for instance, expected their dealers to supervise their efforts to control alcoholism, to find carpenters to renovate their studios, and to handle their attacks of anxiety about their creativity. But it is clear that dealers, too, derive advantages from the emotional as well as the financial dependency of artists. The artist who feels able to impose on his dealer with midnight phone calls for psychiatric advice is more than contractually tied to the dealer.

It is difficult to avoid presuming the existence of emotional ties and personal obligations in a relationship which requires situational trust. Feeling that the dealer wants to help him as a friend, the artist more

willingly gives the dealer the flexibility he needs to coordinate the roles of artist's manager, buyer's counselor, and collector in his own right. While artist and dealer are aware of the manipulation and exploitation to which trust may be put, this awareness is displaced as a criticism of the market in general, so that the business of creating and selling art can proceed. Dealers stereotype artists as a group as being childlike and unreasonable, while artists characterize dealers as dishonest. Particular artists and the dealers with whom they affiliate, however, find in each other an exception to their respective stereotypes.

### *Evading the Dealer*

Those few artists with the strongest market leverage and economic self-confidence hire personal agents, usually lawyers, to oversee their businesses and negotiate with their dealers and buyers. These artists are freer to indulge their feelings that the market abuses the creative artist. For the traditional trust relationship, they substitute explicit contracts which provide for such details as the reclaiming of sold work for exhibition purposes, or the claiming of 10 percent of the appreciated value of a work on its first resale. Their demands are justified by their anti-commercial indignation.

The "celebrity artists," those among the successful elite who utilize a public persona as showmen and entertainers to draw attention to their art, disparage the market aspect of fine art by seeming to circumvent it with a mass appeal. They cater to the public's uneasiness about esoteric pretensions by making their art an outrageous plaything, a spectacle that people of all levels of education in art may attend, if only they will accept the unstuffiness of the aesthetic enterprise. Like Christo's running fences and wrapped buildings and Warhol's movie-star portraits, the work of celebrity artists is grist for commentary by the mass media and seems to solicit public response rather than critical appraisal.

A few successful artists, rather than evading the gallery system, have campaigned for its reform. The highly successful New York painter Robert Rauschenberg and his business manager, Rubin Borewitz, are leading advocates of an amendment to the federal Copyright Act which would give artists 15 percent of the appreciated value of paintings at resale. They took up this issue in 1975 after one of Rauschenberg's paintings, *Thaw*, sold to the collector Robert Scull in 1963 for \$900, was resold at auction by Scull for \$85,000. Other well-known artists, including Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Hans Haake, support artist royalties. However, not all of the artist community share their enthusiasm. As artist Judy Pendleton, a spokesperson for the royalty movement which calls itself the Artists Rights Association, said, "The country is getting



used to contracts. People accept them for anything they buy—a used car, an apartment—so why not a painting? Part of the job is trying to get the *artist* to accept the contract as part of the deal.”<sup>4</sup>

The royalty contract advocated by some successful artists has proved to be a divisive issue because it would affect the well-known and the unknown artist differently. Edward Koch, as a Manhattan congressman who identified artists as an important part of his constituency, explained this difference: “I am concerned that this proposal will inhibit art buying particularly from young artists most in need of help. Many people seek out new artists from whom to buy work at modest prices because of potential gains in the future. We must be careful not to undermine art buying incentives.”<sup>5</sup>

So long as the power rests primarily with the dealer to decide which artists from among the flood of aspirants have the qualifications to be “collectible,” the artist-dealer relationship will remain one of situational trust. The dealer, as gatekeeper to the art world, assumes the initial costs and risks of bringing unknown artists to the attention of those who review art and those who purchase it for public and private collections. The artist has no choice but to trust the dealer in this subtle promotional process. Once the artist becomes known, he can take a more active role in self-promotion by gallery jumping. The best known artists, in whom collectors and critics have a substantial investment, can use this broadened base of support to increase their share of the profits from their career success and to drive harder bargains with both dealers and buyers.

### *Status Awareness*

All the participants in the art transaction have an interest in maintaining a clearly defined status structure among artists. Art attracts investors and collectors because the market focuses upon and validates relatively few art works. The art market requires scarcity, and it achieves this through a restriction of the artist to essentially artisan techniques, which assure that production will be limited and will end with the lifetime of the artist.

While the artist's death allows the dealer to complete the reification process, which transfers life to the collectible art works, it is the ideology of the art world which sustains the collectibility of art by the presumption of its scarcity. The art market limits itself to important original images and objects. The more that film, video, and printing processes flood the public with standardized and simplified imagery, the more the quality of originality is used to differentiate fine art. Because accuracy

and inexpensive duplication are characteristics of technological processes, it has become more important that the art world structure its status system around the relatively few unique products of individual creators.

The artist climbs a narrowing ladder of status on which gallery affiliation provides the primary handhold. The successful artist is, not surprisingly, status sensitive. He wants representation in a gallery where he can show with only reputational equals. He considers the collector's confidence in the gallery to be convertible into a willingness to buy what is displayed. But the gallery system requires the dealer to present a status hierarchy rather than status equals in his exhibitions. This allows the collector to speculate on the new and the cheap, the artist to move from obscurity to recognition, and the dealer to retain an *au courant* reputation.

Each season the dealer selects new artists on the basis of their potential. Artists of realized reputations who enjoyed a similar trial period in their own careers may resent being shown alongside lesser lights. Dealers must solve the problem of mollifying feelings of hurt prestige. The tradition of noblesse oblige that links artists of differing reputations together aids the dealer in placating his upper-status artists. Dealers have come to rely heavily on established artists for recommendations as to which new artists to visit or try out. Known artists are encouraged to play a mentor role, which softens interartist jealousy and facilitates the gallery's search for new blood.<sup>6</sup>

### *Role Strain: Success and its Aftertaste*

If successful artists are nervous about threats to their status, they are often bewildered and angry at seeing the consequences of their success, specifically, the speculative trade in their paintings. “I sometimes wonder about the strange commodity that art is,” said one artist. “How is it that paintings of mine which once I could not sell cheap, say, for under \$500, are now worth many times this just because of the fact that I've done other things since?”

The successful artist often feels that he is passively carried by the currents of a market over which he has no control. Such artists find that their names alone have become as much an item of trade as their art work. When investors have succeeded in pegging the prices of an artist's entire output to the rising value of his reputation, authorship becomes more important than the merits of a particular work. When the market responds primarily to the fact that a particular work is “a Rauschenberg” or “a Smith,” the artist himself has become a commodity.



In addition, accidental market configurations may be responsible for much of the value of the artist's work. This dislocates the artist's preferred belief that, as a creative individual, he is responsible for what is essentially aesthetic value. "I'm lucky to be a leading member in what the critics call a 'school,'" said one artist. "It gives me a firm position in the art universe, and every show and major collector tries to get 'a Hopewell' [not the artist's real name]. Just being a good painter who was one of a kind, I might be ignored."

As a market entity of considerable stature, the successful painter may find that he can no longer afford to express his communal impulses freely. "I've sent three or four things to Vietnam war protest sales in the past, and had one in the Chilean refugee show," explained one artist. "I get many requests, and I used to usually send at least a print. Now, my paintings take six weeks to complete, and sell for far more than they used to. I feel priced out of the charity market."

There is often role strain involved in sudden upward mobility. The artist who was in debt to his dealer and whose renovated studio represented all his assets may find himself relatively "rich and famous" a year or so later. His old economic habits, developed to cope with poverty, are now counterproductive. Yet such habits may still be utilized as a refuge from the pressures of success. One well-known artist spent three days chipping cement away from his bathroom drain pipes so the city inspector could approve his loft renovations. He was within a few weeks of an important show, but he acted as he had done when he first came to SoHo and had to solve his renovation problems with his own labor. Another artist, who was capable of grossing \$15,000 with a single painting that might take him six to eight weeks, hired a truck and scouted the suburban lumber yards for bargain sheetrock with which to renovate his SoHo loft. He spent several weeks on this partition-building project. A third artist worked as a helper to the carpenter he had hired to renovate his loft. The carpenter reported that, despite the artist's fits of enthusiasm with hammer and nails, he was susceptible to distractions and impeded the construction work by arranging the building materials into sculptural forms.

The rise in status introduced by success also strains relationships among artists as well. As one newly successful artist explained, "I've gotten friendly with other artists who are successful. I lost friends who were less successful." Other artists make special efforts to avoid having their success disrupt their friendship with less successful colleagues, but this can spoil a democratic relationship by the suggestion of condescension. "I respect the people who haven't really gotten anywhere," said one artist, "keeping their art a private thing while they work at something else, say teaching. The vast majority do fail, and end up doing five-and-dime paintings or the like."

College teaching, sometimes seen as an alternative institutional prop for the fine-art career, cannot deliver the art-world prominence offered by dealer affiliation. Teaching absorbs the artist into a collegiate rather than an art world, as a now well-known artist explained:

When I taught at [a small Ivy League school], no one there saw me as an artist. It's easy to fall into the role of artist-in-residence for a bourgeois faculty, but that's not being an artist. All my life's dealings—in faculty politics and whatever—were as a teacher. I was somebody who painted on the side. I put "teacher" before "artist" on my income tax returns. I finally maneuvered it so they would not rehire me. I could not have stayed on the faculty and developed as an artist.

The successful artist feels guilty and the unsuccessful artist has his sense of failure aggravated by his contact with a more successful friend. It is difficult for such a pair to share an ideological contempt for the market's blindness to creativity. While artists strive to remain sympathetic to those who are less successful, they are drawn into increasing social relations with their market peers. The proximity of failure in their own careers is unsettling enough without the hovering specter of their unsuccessful friends. "I have a friend, a former artist, who now makes toys, mostly adult toys, and gets lots of orders at the crafts fairs like Rhinebeck," said another successful artist. "He makes dancing dolls, Nixon wood puzzles, things like that. He insists they are not art, but games. Another friend, also a former New York artist, is now having a life crisis about what to do with himself."

Self-mockery is one way in which artists adjust to an identity that has become "rich" and "famous." One successful artist, leafing through the pages of a home-decorating magazine during a conversation with friends, stopped at a picture of a living room with lush floral paintings on the walls. The paintings were his, he said. He had done them in his hungry days, not so long before, when he had taken commissions from a decorator who supplied him with the subject and color swatches to coordinate with the furnishings. He had worked under various French names which, together with a fictitious biography, had been supplied to the client with each painting. "I was once as unfamous as you can get," he said, slowly smiling.

#### *The Nonbohemian Character of the Artistic Elite and the Rationalization of the Creative Process*

Successful artists are systematic and disciplined in their work routines. As one such artist put it, "If you are going to succeed in an



orderly world, you must get into being orderly." He feels that "self-indulgent" artists, who choose to work according to their moods, are not being realistic and will ultimately fail. "Some artists believe in the myth of creative frenzy, but not me," he said. He and other successful SoHo artists plan their creativity and do not trust to the inspiration of the moment, believing that it can let one down. "There is simply no such thing as inspiration," insists this orderly artist. He observes that to depend upon having a great idea as a substitute for a work routine directed toward the systematic solution of problems will eventually leave one with neither a painting program nor a reputation. He knows of only one artist of any reputation who "goofs off" by staying "stoned" much of the year. Two months before a show, this artist locks himself away and somehow accomplishes a year's work. To the more systematic artists, he is a marvelous exception.

Successful artists refer to each other as "machines," reflecting the fact that the pace of their work is like that of an assembly line and that in order to keep up they have to sublimate their more random impulses. They often feel that they are being pushed toward a nervous breakdown by the relentless pressure of precision work. SoHo's abstract painters and new realists, unlike the conceptualist sculptors who usually contract the fabrication of their pieces out to foundries or cabinetmakers, create a finished product and operate with at most one assistant. They typically can do no more than six or eight paintings a year, each requiring over six weeks of daily effort. A painting may sell for \$15,000 or more. To keep the quality and rate of their production up, these artists must remain orderly and keep to a strict schedule. Tasks of taping edges or filling in color fields must be laid out and ready for assistants. While their dealers or personal agents handle sales and exhibitions, and their wives and accountants organize their finances, they remain in the studio six, eight, ten hours a day. Having adopted a method which constricts their productivity and continually generates new technical problems, they must become disciplined personalities. "Art is not an alternative culture," said a well-known photo realist. "It's just ahead of the everyday world. My father-in-law makes the mistake of trying to define art and the artist by their life style, but just like him, I go to work every day."

One artist following this life style lives in a SoHo loft with his wife and child and works in isolation in another loft nearby. The studio loft is clean and empty of all but his work-in-progress. No dealer has to phone him in the morning to prod him to get started; he would fire any such dealer, he says. By nine each morning, he is painting; he breaks briefly for lunch, and returns home in the evening, exhausted. He keeps his telephone manner brisk and to the point and discourages visitors. It may take him as much as four months of steady work to break down an image he wants to use through photographic color-separation techniques and to

execute the finished painting on a ten-by-twelve-foot panel. He works from a forklift truck onto which he has built an elevating platform. This enables him to move step-by-step over the canvas surface, which is crosshatched into a huge grid. His work is intricate, thoughtful, and methodical. "Art is problem solving, much closer to regular work than people think," he says. He is ideologically committed to seek new effects, so the rhythm of his work is shaped by the problems he anticipates as well as those that occur spontaneously. His art is "a matter of getting in and out of trouble."

It is the pace more than the problems that sometimes makes him feel close to a nervous collapse. He has risen to a significant reputation through controlled intensity and imagines his mind as a short-circuiting electrical system. He projects failure and the tension inherent in his discipline as a vision of machine breakdown.

Successful artists compensate for their disbelief in the poetry of inspiration with a commitment to the prose of hard work. They set a difficult pace for their competitors. They utilize order and the elimination of irrelevance to prevent their tools and work places from distracting their attention. Their slides are filed in labeled drawers, their paint cans and spray guns are left laboratory clean. They buy prestretched and sized canvases and contract out the preparation of irregularly shaped working surfaces. Many work to loud rock music, which they use as a kind of white noise that numbs the sense of time and lifts them away from the voices and sounds of the SoHo streets. The new realists, who project photographic images onto a work surface, on which they then apply paint with the faintest strokes of an airbrush, hang blackout curtains over their windows, which enables them to ignore natural light and to work independently of the day-night cycle.

Successful painters learn to isolate themselves from social distractions. "People do not drop in on me," explained one painter. "I wouldn't allow it. A few painters do like to have a coterie around while they work, and there are always people that are looking for any diversion so as not have to do their own work. One old friend used to come around a lot, but I ignored him more or less, and he stopped coming."

These successful artists are artisans working without the standardizations and fellowship of the medieval guild system. Their vulnerability to competition and to the fickleness of the market prevents them from easing their work schedule or playing with new artistic developments in a merely random fashion. As they work, they keep a steady eye on the market. "I visit twenty to thirty galleries each month," said one very successful artist. "It takes me a day and a half."

Having foraged through the technology of industrial society for the tools which give their work a competitive edge over that of other artists, these successful artists risk proletarianizing the conditions of their labor.



And while they are committed by their ideology to the modernist search for the developmental possibilities by which they can become a part of the evolving edge of art history, their market orientation leads many of them toward the more accessible themes and images of popular culture.

*The Rejection of Esoteric Imagery: The Passing of Bohemian Protest*

The works of conceptualists, minimalists, and abstract painters are abundant in SoHo galleries, but the art movement most closely associated with SoHo is new realism. New realist painters reproduce images focused and composed through the camera's lens. Promoted first by the O. K. Harris Gallery and its director, Ivan Karp, it has since been aggressively and successfully publicized as the au courant art movement by other pioneer SoHo galleries, most notably the Louis K. Meisel Gallery. Meisel was among the first to call this new art "photo realism."

Photo realism has proven to be immensely popular with collectors as well as the general audience of art viewers who are drawn into the galleries on their Saturday strolls through SoHo. It is jealousy of this popularity, photo realists claim, which is responsible for attacks on them by artists and critics whose reputations are already committed to conceptually more "difficult" art. Photo realists argue that art should not be restricted to what is validated in the dialogue among critics and art historians. Nor should imagery be used merely to convey the conceptual interests of more philosophic, indeed Platonic, painters. "I've lost friends who became antipathetic toward photo realism," said one artist. "I can defend it. I favor a recognizable subject, as do most people."

While the public loves photo realism, the movement has split the artists' community as have few other art movements. Its very accessibility to the new art-buying middle class seems to some to be sufficient proof that it has betrayed the modernist requirement to relentlessly innovate. As a well-known conceptual artist said, "The very popularity of photo realism proves it to be a rehash of popular culture. No, it is not even a satiric rehash, or else it wouldn't be so popular." The producers of such art, by making a virtue of its accessibility, threaten to carry fine arts toward immediately comprehensible images which do not require the interpretive intervention of the critics. As one photo realist said,

Critics push art which requires interpretation. There are, for instance, two types of conceptual art—the poetic and humorous, and the type pushed by *Art Forum*, serious, Platonic, about which volumes of theory can be written. The first is intuitive and so unexplainable. In the second, the link with lived experience is broken.

*Art Forum* hates new realism because it is totally accessible to the average person. It needs no elite interpretation.

Another photo realist agreed that accessibility was the defining characteristic of this movement, the characteristic that becomes its indictment in the eyes of the critics.

Some call recognizability the lowest common denominator in art, and us photo realists "sell-out schmucks." I could fight this out on theoretical grounds, but usually I don't. I'm not really concerned to do so. I'm concerned with the relation of the camera to painting. Abstract people, with the stamp of approval from [Clement] Greenberg and [Andre] Emmerick, are upset. Why can't I just look at a piece and understand it, at least partially? I want my things to be accessible to those who know no art theory.

The attraction of photo realism lies in the approachability of its imagery to the most naive art viewer. There, depicted with the sharp focus of a camera lens, is the familiar world of store fronts, highway fast-food restaurants, mass-produced knick-knacks, and commercial symbols that lure the public. Any sense of historical depth is banished in mutely reflective chrome and plate glass, with which this movement is enamored, or reduced to the gritty nostalgia for a rusted forties automobile. The frontiers of visual association extend only to the dawn of graphics, to the vintage airplane. Photo realist images glitter with the dozens of coats of enamel which this society lavishes on its motorcycles—its material symbols of escape. These paintings have no need to invoke cultural reference points outside the commercial development along the highways they picture. They reveal no sense of human presence beyond that of pinup images of narcissism and unobtainable desire. It is these works that sell so well that they support the careers of the largest group of the successful SoHo artists.

The photo-realist movement owes its popularity to its ability to seize and reveal the one-dimensionality of a culture and a consciousness framed by advertising graphics. One artist spoke wryly of the avant-garde art of fifteen years ago as having been absorbed by today's society in the trivialized form of commercial designs. "Yesterday's Jackson Pollock is today's linoleum pattern and Gucci print." The new realism is a not-so-seasily absorbed revenge. It is as a nondidactic social record that these works are disturbingly interesting. In close focus, or from a photographer's middle distance, the photo realists depict the perspective of the participant in American society who is unaware than anything but a consumer's culture exists. The painted snapshot of the characterless development house, its self-consciously posed family standing in the



driveway by the station wagon—this is a reification of our meanings and desires, the sentimentality of a society without a useable past. As Americans, we are shown comprehending reality in terms of the static and arbitrarily concrete imagery of the tourist wandering through the public spaces of a foreign land exactly like our own. “Here I show a bank building, people in cars, the whole thing seen through a car windshield,” said an artist about a work in progress. “That’s how we see the world, right? And this is the new American landscape. I’m just a contemporary landscape painter.”

More than other artists, photo realists avoid commenting on their paintings. They believe that if an image is effective it is so as an image and should not need a “verbal caption.” Nor do these artists indulge in unambiguous social criticism. To do so would reduce their art to a mere instrumentality, a cartoon. They are not priests and they claim to have no mystic or arcane knowledge of reality. Their strength is their sensitivity as representative social participants, as litmus paper that reveals society’s dream to be just another California suburb.

Photo realists are the representative artists of the 1970s. It is not surprising that in a society which reduces the aesthetic experience to a commercial lubricant, artists would raid consumer culture for their graphic inspiration. Continuing in the tradition of the pop art of the 1960s, photo realists create a commentary on a society which digests its daily art as package design, and searches its commercial imagery for an aesthetic common ground. Rather than lampoon the concreteness of the commodity by making it oversize, or the triviality of comic-strip emotions by reproducing the comic strip as serious art—tricks of the pop artists—the photo realists rely only on a slight shift in perspective to transcend the clichés of their visual terminology. Theirs is a tough, anti-romantic definition of fine art in which the commercially immersed artist is allowed to have no heroic or humorous distance from popular culture other than that achieved by consciously making that culture an object.

In photo realism, with its philosophy of nontranscendence, SoHo has broken with the bohemian traditions which were strong in the Greenwich Village of the 1920s and persisted through the mid-fifties at such centers as the Black Mountain School.<sup>7</sup> Since the artist was deprived of the protection of aristocratic patronage with the French Revolution, artists have survived in bohemian subcultures in neglected pockets of bourgeois society. The bohemian artist has portrayed himself as the follower of a persecuted cult of beauty, whose central sacrament was the enactment of the artist’s defeat at the hands of a vulgar, profit-oriented society. César Graña describes the spiritual basis of bohemianism, as found in nineteenth-century Paris, as follows:

Bohemia embodies as a social fixture the burning and doomed enthusiasm for the life of the spirit, the daily battle against the powers of

the modern world. . . . Bohemia, for its part, despite all the burning bitterness of its anti-social feeling, was, almost by definition, politically powerless. What caused it to flourish was, in Dondey’s words, “the arsenal of the soul,” the pursuit of purely ideal engagements. Of these the most typical and the most influential historically was the religion of beauty, *l’art pour l’art*, a kingdom whose integrity was free from the secular world, whose tasks . . . permitted the gratification of the romantic need to be at the same time significant and self-centered.<sup>8</sup>

Such a spirit as Graña describes has reached its most diluted form in SoHo, with photo realism’s antiromantic definition of fine art. Its major SoHo alternatives—abstract, conceptual, and minimal art—have defied human interaction by their opacity or their architectural cleanliness and sterility. Perhaps sensing this, the crowds have turned to the photo realists, who tease the audience with a familiarity of imagery whose reflective surfaces convey only a resounding silence about the sub-surface of everyday life. While these artists have no bohemian affectations, their attempts to objectify our plane of attention convey a marked discontent with the triumphant concreteness of commodity culture. A residual bohemianism remains as the quality of a dry irony.

### Conclusion

The artists who are emerging successful in the SoHo market are those who are able to appeal to two audiences at once. First, they succeed in convincing a critical audience—one comprised of other artists, dealers, experienced buyers, and commentators all committed to modernism in art—that their work is significantly avant-garde and deserves to be singled out for attention. Second, they appeal to a less critically assured audience—those whose education and occupational mobility have made them aware of contemporary fine art, but whose daily immersion in popular culture has prevented the refinement of that awareness. This audience wants a certified fine art which is also exciting and accessible to them in nonesoteric terms. Satisfying each of these audiences involves the artist in different strategies.

The critical audience is not satisfied with well-crafted repetition, with decorativeness, or with accurate representation; it wants work that is consistently innovative in its approach to important art problems. The demand for such innovation is a burden to the artist at odds with the realities of the market, since potential customers require a certain amount of consistency or at least predictability in an artist in whom they intend to invest. The solution, for both artist and dealer, is to relegate innovation to marginal alterations within a slowly evolving and characteristic style, once such a style has found market acceptance.



Where dealers cultivate stability within innovation by promoting discernable "movements," constellations of recognizable styles, artists seek a style and a methodology which will permit a routinization of the process of art production so as to make innovation incremental. This is done in three ways: First, through their formal approach to art education, their effective use of dealers as agents, and their continuous surveillance of the market, artists try to anticipate the career consequences of their aesthetic moves. Second, by an allocation of mechanical studio tasks to assistants, by their use of labor-saving tools and prefabricated materials, and through a methodology which generates technical and conceptual problems, they are able to concentrate their attention on those aspects of the work process itself which generate aesthetic challenges. Finally, by organizing their personal relations around their career goals, they are able to enjoy emotional support and a sense of involvement with others without submitting to artistic domination by a social circle. SoHo artists are free to survey the market and art history to identify problems of their own.

The second audience, composed of the aesthetically curious rather than the fully knowledgeable, and approaching art through the modalities of popular culture, has become important in the expanding art market. But they bring in their own concepts of art. Lacking the cultural sophistication of the first audience, they bring to the gallery a familiarity with popular culture that is their most salient and powerful visual resource. Central to popular culture are the sharp, vivid, and clearly focused images of advertising, film, and illustration; these have become the aesthetic coordinates of daily life in America. The graphic depiction of commodities, widely distributed or massively scaled technological products, the clarity and lack of ambiguity of the camera-lens perspective, roadways replete with display-package architecture—these combine to form the modern public landscape and iconography.

This iconography owes its coherence and intersubjectivity to the everpresentness of mass culture, rather than to its ability to express the contradictions and complexity of human experience. It represents a taken-for-granted world in which the power of visual concreteness and familiarity discourages critical distance.<sup>9</sup> Like an all-news radio station, it simply repeats itself in a present without perspective. While it is sufficient as a sign system to direct the traffic of everyday life, it is unable to infuse those signs with an intimation of the human struggle to impose meaning on disorder and disappointment. Popular culture is all on a horizontal plane of message and sign, in which the questions that surround everyday life, questions that demand a symbolic formulation, are trivialized with a specious definitiveness of image. Popular culture is insufficient to locate the individual in a full-dimensional world or to enable him to peer around the edges of daily life.

The new audience approaches fine art with a sense of the insufficiency of popular images, but also with a taste for their energy, vividness, and lack of subtlety. Some SoHo artists, photo realists and a few conceptualists in particular, have been able to build careers by satisfying the needs of this new audience by appropriating the commercial imagery of everyday life and presenting it as fine art. These artists are providing the new audience with both the accessible subject matter it prefers and the opportunity to stand outside an objectified commercial culture. The photo realists' endorsement of popular culture in the vehicle of fine art, their appropriation of its graphic strength, becomes an ironic commentary on that culture's limitations.